

# SBMTV Bell Program

By Mark Jordan



*SBMTV President, Chris Orr has been taking care of trails in Santa Barbara for over ten years.*

**S**ITTING ON AN EXTENDED EAST/WEST SECTION OF PACIFIC COASTLINE, SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA IS A HOT SPOT FOR TOURISM, EDUCATION AND AGRICULTURE. THE CLIMATE IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS MEDITERRANEAN WITH WARMER WINTERS AND COOLER SUMMERS. WITH THE CITY'S PROXIMITY TO THE LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST AND THE 4,000-FOOT SANTA YNEZ MOUNTAIN RANGE RISING FROM THE EDGE OF TOWN, IT'S AN IDEAL LOCATION FOR MANY TYPES OF RECREATION. HOWEVER, WITH TIGHT BUDGETS, THREE DIFFERENT DIVISIONS MANAGING THE TRAIL NETWORK AND MANY OUT-OF-TOWN TRAIL USERS, IT'S AN AREA THAT HAS BEEN PLAGUED WITH TRAIL ISSUES.

The chief concern in the Santa Barbara area is the lack of a trail management plan because the trail network is spread out between land that falls under three different jurisdictions: Los Padres National Forest, City of Santa Barbara and County of Santa Barbara. Currently, a task force has been established to make recommendations to the three divisions to help design a multi-jurisdictional master plan for the front country trails of the Santa Ynez mountains. In the meantime, the Santa Barbara Mountain Bike Trail Volunteers (SBMTV) have been making key gains in trail education and management.

SBMTV is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and maintaining sustainable trail access for all users, with a focus on mountain bikers. For over 20 years, the group has been the chief organizer of trail education

programs, trail building and maintenance, and trail stewardship in the Santa Barbara area.

One of the key ideas that SBMTV has implemented is a bell program. The bell program is one part user education and one part rider participation. SBMTV members talk with trail users to help educate them on the trail network, different user groups, trail etiquette and trail work programs. They also hand out bells at trailheads to mountain bikers, which help alert other users of their presence on the trail. Bell boxes are located at the top and bottom of the trails so riders can grab a bell, use it on their ride and then drop it off at the bottom. Riders are even encouraged to keep a bell and continue to use it. This program has not only provided valuable education,

but it has also helped relieve tension between user groups and provided a much better experience for all trail users. In fact, the bell program has worked so well, it can be seen as a model for other areas to help reduce trail issues.

We checked in with SBMTV's Acting President, Chris Orr, about how the bell program came about, its benefits and the need for proper trail management to sustain a friendly multi-use trail network.

#### **DECLINE: How did the bell program start?**

**CHRIS ORR:** Around year 2000, Chuck Anderson, the president of SBMTV, was looking for someone in the downhill community to help with trail access issues and he found me. There were threats of closing Snyder trail, more commonly know as Knapps, and other access issues on front country trails. We sat around for numerous days, talking about how to educate riders.

At that time, a lot of the downhill community centered around the Velo Pro bike shop. One day I was in the shop and I saw one of the bear bells on the table and I thought that it might help hikers and equestrians hear a bike coming. I was with my buddies Jon Bell and Tosh Bulger at the shop. We talked about using bear bells instead of the dingy bells so they would ring all the time. Then we talked to local pro Shaums March and he confirmed the idea by saying that he had run a bell on his bike and it really helped. SBMTV thought it was a great idea and we started to think about how to fund, distribute and educate people about the bells.

We held a riders' meeting to discuss it and most of the local downhill community showed up, including Shaums March, Adrian Cortina, Darren Delgado and his brother, John Kirkcaldie and many local riders. We talked about rider issues and the consensus was that the bells would help. That was the start of the peer pressure side of the issues, when everyone agreed that running a bell would help.

We put out a description of the bell program, kicked in our own money to get the bells into the local bike shops and handed bells out on the trails. That started the whole program.

Soon after, we talked with the forest service, city and county officials about the bell program and then we posted bell boxes at the top and bottom of key trails.

After we started the program, Kelly Steelman from Kona was on the SBMTV board and thought it was such a good idea that Kona started making their own bells with the Kona logo on them. Specialized at one time had Specialized bells.

#### **How much of an impact has the bell program made?**

With the bell program, we also started a trailhead education program to inform trail users about the multi-use trails. We had someone at the top of the trails on weekends to pass out bells and talk to trail users about access issues, trail etiquette and trail work events. There was good acceptance from local riders but it took more convincing to get non-local riders to run a bell. But between 2001 and 2005, we saw a significant drop in reported conflicts on the trails with much less people phoning in or writing letters that mountain bikers were causing trail issues. In addition, other users were thankful and appreciative of the bells because they could hear the bikes coming. It enabled them to share the trails a little better because they were less surprised by bikers and they had a better experience.

Now the bell program has become a standard thing. It is a rare occasion that someone isn't riding with a bell. In fact, we were holding a "Ride with a Pro" day not too long ago and Duncan Riffle was with us. While we were going over our trail etiquette spiel with the other riders and Duncan said, "It's mandatory that everyone runs a bell." That pretty much sums it up.

Santa Barbara's trail infrastructure hasn't been that great. There isn't that much information on the trail system, telling people about the trail network, level of difficulty or different user groups. People were coming to the trails expecting to have them to themselves. Without a solid trail infrastructure like proper signage, people's expectations can become disappointed by other

users. The bell program helped change that perspective because it helped educate and alert other people. Not having signs at the trailheads is probably a big reason why we needed something like a bell program and why it worked so well.

#### **How do you raise funds for the bell program?**

We sell bells to shops and that usually funds more bells to sell to shops. We also get donations on our website and people sometimes give us donations when we hand out bells on the trail. We have applied for grants a few times but it has never really fit into any of the trail education grants yet. We are trying to figure out how to make that work. At one time, we were hoping that this would become a community-sponsored program but that hasn't happened yet.

#### **Where else has the bell program been implemented?**

In San Luis Obispo, they started a bell program with their own funding. Then they proposed to the shops that they could get their logo on one side of the bells if they helped fund the program. They took the idea to all of the shops in their area and now they have four shops that support their own shop bells with their name on them. Each bell box will have an assortment of bells and the shops get advertising and it is reducing trail conflicts. The shop are taking some ownership and stewardship for improving their trail community.

There is also a group that does it in Los Angeles and one in San Diego. We recently had someone in Utah ask us for our program description to develop the program. We get a lot of requests for our program and where we buy our bells, so it seems to be growing but I don't know all of the locations that it has taken off.

At the 2002 IMBA conference, I sat in on a freeride/downhill panel and talked about the bell program. I think it enlightened some people.

#### **What are you guys working on right now?**

We have three different management agencies in a small area. Because of that, we don't have a trail management plan that states how to manage these trails. Without that plan there are always issues that will come up that can become bigger issues than they need to be.

A few important pieces of the plan include an inventory of trails, maps with trail ratings and length, a good trail volunteer and trail work program, and a good trail conditions reporting program or process. We also need some sort of trail stewardship or trail patrol program that is inclusive of all the different users, not just one class. We are continuing to work on all of that right now.

We have been making a big push to get our name out there more to make people aware that we are working on trail access, maintenance and education. We want to make people aware that it would be beneficial for them to come to meetings and voice their views. We are also pushing hard for those three agencies to develop a trails management plan and trying to figure out ways to fund trail work to help everyone take care of the trails.

We are also working to negotiate some trails out of a wilderness proposal. One of our suggestions is to use a different designation for the proposed wilderness areas that would allow mountain bike use. One way to help people have a better experience is to have more trails to disperse people on. Closing down trail use to specific user groups is counter to that idea and it can exclude some environmental views by closing out specific groups and we don't want that. ☐

*The Front Country Trails Multi-Jurisdictional Task Force is currently holding meetings to help make recommendations to fulfill a master trail plan. It is important that mountain bikers attend these meetings to ensure proper representation and continued access to the front country trails. To learn more and show your support, go to [sbmtv.org](http://sbmtv.org)*



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