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**-The RVA Team**





# RAISING HELL

**BENJAMIN WEST | MAY 8, 2019**



**TOPICS:** [ANN BERETTA](#), [AVAIL](#), [BIKE RACING](#), [BMX](#), [DIRT BIKES](#), [FAMILY SPORTS](#), [RICHMOND BMX](#)

*Local BMX isn't a kiddie sport — in the hands of Richmond BMX, it's an extreme, all-ages family bonding sesh.*

At Gillies Creek Park, just up the road from Shockoe Bottom, the smell of cooking charcoal floats through the air. Neon figures in wraparound helmets and tiny bikes bob up and down on a twisting track. A booming voice, with ESPN-esque accentuation comes on over the final licks of something to the tune of Green Day's "Brain Stew." In the "pit," as the riders call it, immediately over the fence setting off the racetrack from the rest of the world, families in tents cross-pollinate, sharing stories and tailgate-style snacks as riders big and small make their way to the starting gate.

At [Richmond BMX's](#) public racetrack, today is Sunday. And Sunday is race day.

"We always say it's a youth sport, but it's a *family* sport," Richmond BMX track operator Gary Craig said, drawing out the word "family" with a pointed, smiling emphasis. He has bright eyes, a goatee, and seemingly endless energy.

BMX, which stands for Bicycle Motocross — is a racing sport that has seen sharp popularity hikes in the last five years, [with 3.44 million participants according to Statista](#). Beginning, according to some stories, in 1960s California as a way for kids to emulate their motorcycle motocross heroes, the theory is simple. Ride your bike down a long, winding snake-run of a track, sticking jumps and wallbank turns along the way. First one across the checkered finish line wins.

"Kids and adults can participate," Craig said, "but those that aren't on the track, they're involved in some way."

"There's no passiveness to it."



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The track is a nonprofit, and Craig's position is volunteer. During the BMX racing season, March through October, Craig is needed at the track for at least 100 of those days, which he needs to coordinate so they don't butt up against his day job. But it's no secret that he's happy to do it; it shows in his voice, in his body language. His father ran the local track when he was a kid, had a shop and a BMX team.

"People did it for me when I was a kid," he said. "I had the opportunity to race all over the country because there were adults who did the same thing that I'm doing now."



*(Photo by Benjamin West)*

As practice runs peter out, the omniscient announcer, reminiscent of NASCAR or the Kentucky Derby, albeit a bit smaller, friendlier, floods the track again. It seems to know everybody's name. It commentates the first heats as they begin and calls out the recent achievements of participating riders.

"And a slight advantage for the two-spot, Ryder [Brookshire] — he's, like, a veteran of the five and under class. He's out front, on the one-spot. Wassup Ryder? Don't look at me, look forward, my man, I'm just cheering for you."

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It takes only a second to realize — the booming voice is Craig. He's running around, in and out of the track, looking almost like a bobblehead in his oversized helmet, getting out of the way as the bikers fly by and moving to where he can get a better view.

"Ryder Brookshire onnnn the one. Love the little tykes, they've always got, like, blue candy stuff all over their face."

"Charlie Holmes on the two — Colton Lyles on the three, he made his main event up there in NOVA BMX yesterday with a packed gate!"

With a mic stuffed up into his helmet, even when he's riding, Craig is commentating over the loudspeaker. Sometimes he hangs back in the pack to give the play-by-play, as slick as anybody on the radio, and sometimes he bursts ahead, still talking and throwing out jokes. In his first heat of the day, he places second, and then jogs up to the gate before the next heat drops — a group of teenagers this time.

"Hold on, just learning how to breathe again," he says. He's heaving, and there's humor in his voice.

He's up by the bleachers when the gate drops for the women's 46 – 50 cruiser class (the cruiser being a type of BMX bike with 24 inch wheels).

"Coming up on the second straightaway: my favorite BMXer," he says as his wife, Andrea, speeds past.

Craig isn't kidding when he says BMX is a family sport. Andrea and a few other moms, under a central, wooden platform, handle registration every Sunday, juggling hundreds of copies of forms.

There are parents positioned around the track in case of falls, and many of them will be riders themselves as the day moves forward. Moms and dads help tweak bikes. They give all the little riders buzzing around pep talks and highfives, making sure everybody is hydrated, happy, and most of all, stoked.

"If you're in soccer or baseball or football, the parent brings the kid to the practice for the day or the competition for the day and then sits in the stands," Craig said.

"With BMX, the parent is — they're the mechanic, they're the medic, they're the coach, they're the motivator, they're the consoler. They're all those things."

Exhibit one: [The Hooligans](#).

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*The Hooligans: Raiden Liesfeld, Cash Huddleston, Sachiko Bowman, Robert Huddleston, Zoe Craig, Charlie Bowman, Isabella Craig, Masumi Hyodo, Canon Liesfeld, Chris Liesfeld (Photo by Benjamin West)*

In the lulls between their heats, the adult members of Hooligan Racing are found lounging back in canvas camp-style lawn chairs and passing around snacks, pitched in a tent between two other teams. The kids draw pictures on a makeshift table and joke around, trying most of the time not to get too rowdy. Everybody, minus the helmets, is decked out in full racing gear — black and red, with their names on the back of their shirts and an American traditional-style panther emulating a tattoo on the bicep area of their sleeves.

Most of the Hooligan parents biked in some form another as teenagers, and played together in punk bands. Rob Huddleston, a founding member of Ann Beretta, rode BMX religiously into his mid 20s. Beau Butler (unable to make it out to the track Sunday) is a member of local punk legends Avail, who recently shook the city by announcing their first show in 12 years. Huddleston remembers Charlie Bowman, another Hooligan parent, back in the day riding bikes constantly, switching between his mountain bike to hit the local trails and his road bike for his work as a messenger. Today, Huddleston says it's not uncommon for Bowman to do 30 miles before heading to the BMX track where he'll ride all day. When the light starts to fall, he sometimes will even ride his bike home.

Today the Hooligans are decked out with a whole slew of sponsors, including Mongoose Bikes, Box BMX, Powers Bike Shop, Profile Racing, and FLY Racing USA. But at first — just two years ago — it was just some old friends meeting up at the track, rekindling their love for BMX alongside their kids — 7, 8, 9 years old — who were discovering it for the first time.



After trying to get his son, Cash Huddleston, on a bike for years, Huddleston remembers pulling some of his old bikes out of his parents' barn during a visit, just to noodle around and fix them up. [Menu](#) When he had his back turned, Cash, then 8 years old, hopped on the bike and started blasting around the yard.

"That's how he is," Huddleston said about his son. "He just decided to ride. No training wheels, no 'Dad, will you balance me and push me down the hill?' He just jumped on and rode. And 30 minutes later he was asking for a shovel to build a dirt jump."

This was the week before Christmas — so anybody can guess how it plays out. The day after the holiday, Cash, who now sports a shock of electric blue-dyed hair, was down at Gillies Park with his own bike flying down the course.

"A pretty common story here — that got me back into it," Huddleston said.



*Mongoose Bicycles Team Manager Leigh Ramsdell jumps over Cash Huddleston (Photo by Rob Huddleston)*

First it was Huddleston and Butler hanging out at the track, but as they invited more and more friends, it became a Sunday family tradition.

Still, it took some time for the adults to move from the bleachers to the bikes. Richmond BMX is equipped with a shed full of loaner bikes and safety gear — available for use free of charge. But with [Menu](#) full-time jobs to go to the next morning, it can be daunting. Huddleston says a broken collarbone is the most common “BMX dad injury” and if asked, Craig will pull back his shirt to show you his scar.

“I was kind of egging everyone on, but at the same time not wanting to do it — not yet,” Huddleston said.

Ultimately, it was Masumi Hyodo (the Hooligans call her Sumi) who first made the leap. Hyodo and Bowman, who are married, first got their daughter, Sachiko, on one of their old, beat-up bikes during a birthday party for Cash at the track. The next week, she leveled up to one of the loaners, and soon she had on of her own. Sundays came and went, and Hyodo thought she was content hanging out in the tent with the other adults. But then...

“There’s a lot of women who actually race, and they all came over while I was sitting, like — ‘c’mon!” she said, miming their gestures.

“There were only three of us, and I got third place,” she said, laughing.

On slow days, if the track can’t fill one of the older age brackets, riders in, say, the 46 -50-year-old heats have to race younger teenagers, say, 16 or 17-year-olds. Hyodo said it can be difficult to keep up with the young guns, but she loves it and the challenge has recently made her much faster.

“I didn’t realize I was competitive,” she said, laughing again.

Though their past experience with the sport varied, one by one, the adults started racing themselves. They bought gear, built bikes, and began to cherish their Sunday tradition — their time with their kids, their time with their friends — even more than before.

Soon Cash and Sachiko and all the other young Hooligans started noticing the colorful jerseys around them — signifying the different BMX teams.

A quick note about BMX teams at the local level: most kids, according to Huddleston and Craig, race their first season solo. They have their parents and friends, of course, but they aren’t truly locked in with a particular club. BMX is a highly individual sport, and there are rarely team events. But teams do act as a further support group, people to look up to, people to root for.

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*Masumi Hyodo, Andrea Craig, Isabella Craig and other riders line up at the starting gate (Photo by Benjamin West)*

"They all wanted to be on different teams, for different reasons," Huddleston said.

The kids were between the ages of 7 and 10, he clarified, and the reasons were pretty arbitrary. Mostly it boiled down to what jersey they liked the best.

"It's all about the jersey, man," Craig said upon hearing this with a huge grin.

The math was a bit brutal — picturing the kids all over, under different tents. What if one was invited to a team and the other wasn't? What if this split up the group?

"So we just went back to that DIY thing and were like: screw it, let's make our own team," Huddleston said.

It makes sense, really. The DIY work ethic runs like a main artery through the Richmond punk and extreme sports subcultures, exactly the places where the adult Hooligans came of age. Where they met. Where they bonded. And it's where the younger Hooligans are growing up now.

Build something. Learn something. Do it yourself. Have fun.



Huddleston, a graphic designer by trade, cooked up a logo and pieced together the team's jerseys.

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Logo: check. Graphics: check. Now, the final piece of the puzzle: what's a sports jersey without sponsors pasted all over the back?

First they approached local businesses throughout the area, friends of the team, tattoo shops and the like — your logo on our jersey in exchange for some support. When it comes to BMX companies, this usually amounts to a discount on gear. Huddleston also contacted old friends from his Ann Beretta days. At the same time, he said he noticed that Hooligan Racing was quickly gaining recognition, and to this day, he's not exactly sure why.

"By the end of last year, anytime we would go out of town people were like: 'Oh, I've heard of you guys.' Even if we were out of state," Huddleston said.

The highlight of this buildup might have been when Huddleston and Cash were riding a skatepark in North Carolina with Mongoose Freestyle Team Manager Leigh Ramsdell, a friend of Huddleston's going way back. Ramsdell told the duo over lunch that the higher ups at Mongoose had approved a sponsorship of Hooligan Racing.

"It's all for fun," Huddleston said. "It's still just us as friends and our kids and our families. But we've definitely started to get a little more competitive."



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It's easy to see the Gillies Creek BMX track as the local watering hole — or the pool in vintage 1950s suburbia pictures. People gather and they connect. That's what they're really there for. The pool is just an excuse to leave the house. But to the Hooligans and all the other families, it's much more than that. They've invested something that those postcard-sized pool people haven't. They are passionate about this sport, and they are sharing the passion directly and laterally with their kids. It's something they equally take seriously and have tons of fun with. And there's no patronizing for the kids who enjoy sport either. How could there be, when the youngest of them are 3 or 4, and the oldest, former Richmond BMX Track Operator Arthur Luck, is 71?

Round one is over and there's a 10-minute break. At this point, every registered rider has completed their first race, but the energy stays high. It's not over until round 3, when the sum of each rider's wins are tallied and the plastic trophies swarming a wooden, makeshift table are passed out.

A 16-year-old boy named Xavier Edmonds approaches the Hooligans' tent with an innertube slung over his arm, his jersey sky-blue against their red and black ones. It's not uncommon to see riders from different teams hanging out with each other — in fact, look around during the break period and the colors collide like spilt motor oil.

Edmonds is asking for his picture taken. He's anticipating a wild jump on the second straightaway, and he thinks it'll make a great photo.

Before long, Edmonds is gone again to work on a spare bike in the lull between rounds. It seems as if he never stops working on it. The day before he had approached Craig with the skeleton frame of a bike painted jet black, showing it off.

"How many coats is it?" Craig asked.

"Three."

"Make sure you let it really cure, because otherwise it will chip really easily," Craig told him. "You've got some runs over here."

"I'm going to make it all black," Edmonds said with a huge smile.

"Black on black," Craig said. They were both chuckling now. "Murdered out!"

Edmonds doesn't come from a BMX family. He's just a neighborhood kid from the apartments down the street who stumbled onto the track a few years ago. One of four local kids the track is able to sponsor, Richmond BMX pays his and the other sponsored kids' entry and membership fees, and helps them find secondhand gear.

"All that we ever ask is that they help us out," Craig said.

Menu It's not a huge workload — tearing down and setting up on race days, or joining the volunteers when track upgrades are made.

"We don't track specifically how much they do," Craig said, "but we want to get them involved in the program and understand that there's value in volunteering — in contributing your time and donating your time for something that's bigger than just what you want to be doing."



*Opening parade lap (Photo by Benjamin West)*

During his first season, Edmonds' grades started slipping and his family said he couldn't race until he picked himself back up. He spun his entire school life around, graduating high school early. Soon he'll be heading off to trade school to become a welder. When the starting gate at the front of the track needed fixing, Edmonds was on the scene helping to weld the thing back together.

"We don't get to have a lot of those opportunities, it's just not where our capacity is right now," Craig said, clarifying that, if Richmond BMX can even help out one or two kids in some small way, it's all worth it.

"He's going to come back to BMX at some point in his life," Craig said. "He'll find his way away from it at some point, but later on in life he'll find his way back to the BMX track. I'm sure of it."



During the break, Craig starts calling through the PA for a special event, a moneymatch race.

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“For a track operator’s 20 bucks,” he says.

The required eight riders pedal up to the gate, a spectrum of ages and skill levels. They stand waiting, a jumble of metal and spokes between their legs. Edmonds is there. In the world of BMX, being as close to the inside of the track — the number one slot — is a known advantage. Edmonds is in the fourth slot; not too bad.

“Riders ready,” says a distorted, monotone voice — not Craig’s.

“Watch the gate.”

*BEEP BEEP BEEP*

The gate slams down with a hydraulic-like hiss, and the riders, aiming down the barrel of their front tire, take off with an audible rush. Edmonds has his work cut out for him. Among the other competitors is Payton Ridenour. She’s at Gillies Creek with her trainer. It’s a known fact that she’ll likely go pro someday.

“Ridenour with the first straight pull trying to get there, Ridenour gonna dive in the inside, nothin’ doing! Edmonds out front, Ridenour charging down the second straightaway! It’s Edmonds, Ridenour, one and two!”

Their legs are pumping like pistons and sometimes it looks like they’re leaning so far forward they’ll fall over their handlebars. When they launch off a jump and their wheels leave for the air, it feels like they could almost hang there forever. Graceful.

“Last turn, last straightaway!”

“Edmonds!”

“Ridenour!”

“Xavier Edmonds! WOAHHHHH YEAHHHHH!”

Edmonds does it; he’s like a bullet across the finish line. Immediately, he’s swarmed by the other riders. Even the other competitors are grabbing his shoulders and high-fiving him. Craig jogs over and holds up the crisp \$20 bill. Edmonds takes it. He looks around. Throws out a few more high-fives. He’s beaming.

*Top photo by Benjamin West*

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## Benjamin West



Benjamin West has lived in Richmond for about half a decade. He loves long walks on North Bank trail and adding to his collection of mid-grade pens. His New Year's resolution was to choose campy, sci-fi paperback illustrations for all of his Spotify playlists, but he's already tripped up a few times.

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