

Icon Gone – The WORCA Toonie Race

by Todd Hellinga

As I began to prepare for tonight, I was thinking about all the great photos I could use to illustrate my points, bringing them home in a hard hitting fashion....then I realized, to do that would likely embarrass, alienate, and implicate many friends and acquaintances in situations they may or may not recall, or want to recall! Being selfishly partial to those friendships and not wanting to be chased around by a surly mob of sweaty mountain bikers, threatening violence with handpumps, I thought better of it...hence my prop-free presentation this evening.

Tonight I bring forth something that I, and many others, see as the quintessential Whistler Icon. Not only because it brings 2-300 Whistler locals, and tourists, together EVERY Thursday night all summer (24 weeks straight), not only because it embodies health, fitness, being outdoors, and beer, (the pillars of Whistler), but also because it is a phenomenon that has existed in this town since before fat skis, twin tips, or the Dual Mountain. It has survived fluorescent spandex, 12-speed fully rigid bikes, and cantilever brakes.

Often emulated, but always in a league of its own, the format has been envied, and copied by clubs around the world, even the Nordic skiing freaks have adopted it to bring a year round community social event to the people. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Thursday night, biking, drinking, heartburning, leg straining, lung searing, mate seeking, social event of the week, WORCA's famous, or infamous, Toonie Race!

Starting out as 20 guys getting together for bragging rights, bringing their own beer and food, the Toonie race has evolved into one of the largest, regular, club races in the world. Sponsors team up to provide a fun challenging ride, food from a large cross section of whistler's many restaurants and eateries, all washed down with malty beverages, many many malty beverages!

In these hard recessionary times, there is no better value in this town for food & drink on a Thursday evening. Toss a toonie in the money box, ride your bike for a while, and then line up for beer and food....and more often than not, that toonie gains extra value as the beer frequently flows beyond just one, and your dollar goes further and further as the night gets colder and darker, as well as fuzzier and blurrier. Best use of your last \$2? I'd say so; you'll probably drink enough to forget that it was your last \$2!

Toonie racers also help the economy of local businesses, especially Citta's patio, as the night's men's and ladies winners typically migrate to the patio for après après, and the winner's cash is used for pitchers all around.

Riding home, in the dark, without lights, and in various stages of inebriation, also helps out our local bikeshops as riders find themselves crashing into ditches, valley trail barriers, or each other..."How'd you break this again?"..."Oooh, uhhh, well, I was just riding home from the Toonie race....." That combined with courses using Whistler's infamously technical trails ensures a steady supply of broken bikes and parts headed to our awesome bike shops, keeping our Mechanics employed, and surly, at our ability to break unbreakable things. Be sure to bring them a 6 pack when you show up Thursday morning and need "A quick repair before the toonie tonight"

Going to Toonie races also helps WORCA achieve its environmental objectives. Every time \$2 goes into the kitty, half of that goes to WORCA's trail maintenance program. As per our mandate we strive to maintain and improve our huge trail system. Racing your bike helps us make our trails more sustainable, and keeps Whistler on the forefront of mountain bike trail building around the world. They also help foster a more general appreciation of all types of bike riding....fun on mountain bikes = bikes are fun = ride more bikes = get out of cars and onto a bike! Ride To Ride!

The Social nature of these events, however, is exactly what makes them such a great Icon. After my first winter in town, I wasn't blown away, but as spring approached everyone kept saying how much I had to do the Toonie races, and how great they were..."Sure, okay, whatever" I'd mumble, being pretty skeptical that some weekly bike race was so good....I was completely blown away, and they may have ended up being the single reason that made me realize what an amazing town and community this really is, and why I'm still here, and likely never to leave. Half part fitness, half part speed dating...it's definitely the best, and cheapest, way to meet new friends, as well as your next one night stand, boyfriend or girlfriend, spouse, oooooor, your next ex-boyfriend, ex-girlfriend, or ex-spouse....love chased, love found, love lost, repeat...Toonie racers have seen and lived it all!

Body feeling beat up after all that tough riding up and down steep mountain sides? It's also the best place to meet your next massage therapist, physiotherapist, chiropractor, or general practitioner....I met my doctor in the parking lot before a Toonie race, after banging up some ribs and being pretty sore, she gave me a quick once over in the parking lot, said I was probably fine, and ensured a customer for as long as I live here. I met my chiro by chasing him around trails during the races, he's usually faster than me, until it gets wet and technical, but I, uhhhh, let him beat me, because he could probably hurt me! Need a lawyer, architect, realtor, or consultant? We've got tones of those too....carpenters, electricians, plumbers, check. Cooks, bike techs, servers, ski or snowboard bums, and these days, bike bums too....we've got it all. Nowhere else in the town, or country in my opinion, will you find such a diverse, and friendly, mishmash of social classes. People that likely wouldn't be friends, or even acquaintances, anywhere else, brought together by their love of bikes, and beers!

In the end the sense of community, camaraderie, and the friendships that Toonie races have borne, are the reasons I am still in this town. These people believed in my abilities more than myself, pushed me to try things I thought myself incapable of, supported me, and others, who have had the unpleasantness of serious injury. They are the people I now see regularly in the lift lines in the winter, where before it was just a sea of unknown faces. The people who share knowing looks when spring is starting to come around, eagerly waiting the best season in this town. They are anywhere and everywhere in this town, waiting for the snow to melt, the trails to open, and the Toonie season to start. Waiting with eagerness to see everyone and share a truly unique, and truly whistler, experience. The Toonie races are whistler's greatest Icon because it is us, it is our community, it's the heart and soul of this town. Bringing together our mass of diversity under one common banner, riding bikes, drinking beer, and loving every minute of our lives in this amazing town! See you all on April 30th for the first one of the year, LONG LIVE TOONIES!