



SMALLER COMPANIES, LIKE KNOLLY (WHO JUST SIGNED RYAN BERRELOTH, SHOWN), CAN MORE EASILY TARGET SPECIFIC REGIONS AND RIDING STYLES TO BETTER SERVE THE NICHE CUSTOMER.

no denying that, two to three years ago, the line was not where it is today," says Trek's global MTB marketing manager, Michael Browne. "But when the Session was launched, it was met with a lot of applause."

Even so, Browne says that "the biggest shift was to get mountain biking into the culture." Joe Vadeboncoeur, a Trek product manager, was instrumental in getting the company to buy land to make trails near its Waterloo, Wisconsin, HQ. Today, lunchtime trail rides are hugely popular. "Everyone, from accounting to product people, now get why what we're doing [with freeride] is important," says Browne.

But culture alone doesn't explain the big impact of small builders. Doug "Dewey" Lafavor of Kona, says that small brands can also exploit regional preferences and experiment more. "For us, it has to be a slower process," he says. "If you just came up with a new design and ran it, and had 10,000 frames come out wrong, that would be a bad thing." That explains why Kona existed for years on a basic four-bar platform before introducing the Magic Link design two seasons ago.

"IF YOU CAME UP WITH A DESIGN AND RAN IT, AND HAD 10,000 FRAMES COME OUT WRONG, THAT WOULD BE A BAD THING."

BECAUSE THEY KNOW IT Lafavor also points out that, typically, a freerider is very seasoned and may want to pick his own parts, and is likely to buy just a frame. Brake choice and preferred travel also matter greatly. "If you look at our line, we've got bikes at 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 inches of travel, which seems redundant, but people really are that discerning," he says. "An inch too much travel, if you don't need it, really sacrifices a lot of performance."

All builders agree that ride quality is king. Knolly expanded from just 40 frames in 2002 to thousands now, primarily via word of mouth about how its signature V-Tach rode. "Those first orders basically came from everyone who helped test the bike initially," says marketing manager Chris Glew. "It was pretty obvious that the frame was selling itself."

Ride quality comes down to geometry, good suspension design and suspension tuning—factors that aren't exclusive to large brands. Big makers do have more muscle in competitive DH and work very closely with major suspension suppliers on tuning pros' bikes (and gain from the resulting R&D). But in freeride, a maker like Knolly has equal access.

Trek's Session, designed in part by its suspension guru Jose Gonzalez, features custom valving and shim stacks, but Glew says Knolly also works closely with suppliers like FOX to develop the best product for its platform (made easier, he says, since the Four-by-Four linkage doesn't rely on "strange ratios" for platform damping).

BECAUSE THEY ARE HELD TO A LOWER EXPECTATION Being bigger can enable an expensive (but correct) decision. Trek's Browne says that the company had been moving forward with the Session B, a modified version of its earlier single-pivot Session 10, while it was developing the Active Braking Pivot design that would help make the Session 8B such a standout. "We had the Session B ready to go, but when we started ride-proofing ABP, we realized what a huge difference it would make," he says. Rather than sell the B for a year, Trek killed it and launched the Session 8B instead. Browne estimates the loss from the unutilized Session B at about \$500,000, not including missed sales. But having made mountain biking part of the culture at formerly road-centric Trek, the decision was an easier sell. It was the kind of choice few companies could have afforded to make.

At the same time, Browne admits, Trek will always be held to a higher standard because of its size, and also because its commitment to freeride has been erratic. While a company like Knolly can grow quickly and be recognized for its core commitment to freeride, Trek must overcome its reputation as the 800-pound gorilla of the bike industry. "Even with some of the best freeriders and downhillers in the world on the Session, and winning the [Red Bull] Rampage with Brandon Semunek, we're still met with criticism," says Browne. "We have to work extra hard to alleviate concerns that we're just showing up to the party."—Joe Lindsey

Making it Big by Staying Small

WHY CAN'T LARGE MANUFACTURERS CRUSH THE LITTLE GUY IN THE WORLD OF FREERIDE?

In most bike-making genres, big builders have a clear edge versus small guys—in engineering, production, you name it. But there's one niche where small fry's continue to serve up success: freeride.

The biggest reason to go small? There's little reason not to. And whether it's because of their focus on regional terrain, the premium they (seem) to place on durability, or the desire to build in big-hit performance rather than adhere to typical light/strong/efficient goals, the small guys aren't just surviving, they're thriving.

BECAUSE THEY LIVE IT Technology certainly plays a role for both big and small makes. Niche B.C.-based brand Knolly, which started in freeride, has built its biz around its patented Four-by-Four linkage, which it says solves many of the snafus of wheel travel and standover height that plague other designs. And Trek, long a bit player in freeride, found success with its Session 8B, thanks largely to finally nailing a good gravity-focused design. "There's