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Wheel of fortune: The Athertons cycle to success at the UCI event
PICTURE: GARY WILLIAMSON

MOVING MOUNTAINS

The **UCI Mountain Bike World Cup** saw British siblings the Athertons triumph. *Liam O'Hare* takes in the action

MENTALLY, that was one of the hardest races I've ever done.' Britain's Rachel Atherton may just have made triumphing in the second round of UCI Mountain Bike World Cup look easy, but it wasn't all plain sailing. The 2013 World Champion crashed three times in qualifying and now has had to battle the elements at the World Cup's remote Fort William location, which lies not far from Ben Nevis in the Scottish Highlands.

'I don't think I've ever experienced Fort William with such bad weather,' the 27-year-old tells me at the official World Cup after-party thrown by Jeep and Red Bull. 'It was pretty tough going out there. The crashes really threw me and I lost my head and was a bit of a mess. I had to work really hard to pull myself together and just do what I know I can do.'

Despite the adverse conditions, Atherton — who, along with the her siblings Gee and Dan, is sponsored by Jeep — wins the downhill race convincingly, beating compatriot Tahnee Seagrave into second place by over eight seconds on a course that is muddy and cut-up after days of heavy rain.

The sportswoman is full of praise for the 'amazing' atmosphere created by the local crowd, which she says helps her stay on her bike and give her the victory that her supporters crave. 'It's pretty special to see how into it people are here,' she says. 'It makes me feel like I want to try harder and give them something to cheer about. Their support keeps you upright on the course and they drive you to dig that much deeper.'

In the men's contest, South Africa's Greg Minnaar equals Steve Peat's win of 17 World Cup wins as he edges out the USA's Aaron Gwin. And Rachel's brother Gee, who is himself a two-time world champion, is the top finisher from the UK, coming in fourth place.

The weather fails to dampen the spirits of the thousands

of spectators who have flocked to Fort William to take in the tournament and despite the conditions, Atherton's enthusiasm for the sport is palpable.

'It's the wildest, most empowering thing you'll ever do,' she says. 'I'm passionate about getting more people to try it out — young women in particular. No amount of shopping or make-up or anything else is ever going to match that feeling of hurtling down a mountainside at 40mph or more.'

But Rachel isn't the only Atherton to achieve success at the World Cup: her brother Gee Atherton finishes fourth in the overall standings and is the highest-placed British male.

'I wouldn't advise anybody to rush out and spend a lot of money on a downhill bike before you've tried it out and learnt some skills,' Gee advises those wanting to get involved in the sport. 'Mountain-biking is so accessible these days — trail centres have bikes for hire and cross-country routes that will ease you in gently. Then progress to venues with downhill tracks like Revolution or Antur Stiniog.'

'But do give racing a go! There are loads of grass roots events all over the country — it's awesome!' adds sister Rachel, whose enthusiasm for the sport pays off on the Sunday, when she finishes leading the women's ranking overall and on course to win back her championship crown.

And much to the surprise of the crowds, the sun even makes a late-afternoon appearance as she triumphs on the 2.8km course, which snakes down the picturesque slopes of Aonach Mor.

But the victors don't have long to enjoy their success. There are five more rounds of the World Cup to go and with the Athertons off to the Red Bull Foxhunt race sponsored by Jeep later in the year, plenty more drama is expected.



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Hitting the waves:
Ellie battles
the FlowRider
PICTURE: DANIEL LYNCH

FLOWRIDER

Indoor surfing and bodyboarding is on the rise, meaning Mother Nature no longer dictates the waves. *Ellie Ross* has a go

CLUTCHING a foam board, I shuffle towards the edge of a drop into gushing water. I don't want to jump. I have already watched the rest of my class - 10 small children - battle the frothing waves, getting chewed up and spat out by the white water. One by one, they all emerge with big grins, but that's not enough to squash my nerves now that it's my turn. Taking a deep breath, I launch myself face-first into my indoor surfing debut at Twinwoods Adventure in Bedford. I'm on a FlowRider — a 12 metre-wide slope pumped with artificial water rapids that you can use for bodyboarding and surfing. There are now more than 100 of them worldwide, the original having been unveiled in Texas in 1991.

And although the average age in my one-hour session during school holidays is about eight, private hire is also available for corporate events, stag and hen dos. 'I've had a four-year-old and a 74-year-old on this,' says my instructor Matt Mccluskie, as I pitch up at the warehouse-style room, complete with a cafe overlooking the action. 'It's brilliant fun and a great atmosphere, whatever your age.' But I quickly discover that flowriding is much harder than my miniature classmates make it look as they coolly pull off tricks and flips. Armed with a bodyboard, I repeatedly throw myself off the top of the steep slope and try to maintain some degree of control in the fast-moving sheet of water. Hugging the float to my belly, I career along the waves, carving gently back and forth before a wobbly transition onto my knees. Bodyboarding inside a building feels a bit odd, particularly when I catch the eye of a mum casually sipping a coffee just metres from my float.



'OK, IT'S SHAKY AND NOT STYLISH, BUT FOR 10 UNGRACEFUL SECONDS I FEEL LIKE I'M OWNING THE WAVE'

But it's great fun and — despite my ungraceful attempts and habit of bashing into the sides — I'm quickly hooked.

Only two riders are allowed on at one time to avoid collisions, but I still manage to swerve into my young neighbour, before losing control and getting shot back up to the top of the slope, legs akimbo.

Luckily, the trampoline-like slope and padded walls mean it's almost impossible to hurt yourself on the ride.

'Now try a barrel roll,' Matt, says, giving me an encouraging thumbs-up to attempt the 360-degree spin.

'Be confident and really go for the move. You can't be half-hearted or you won't make it round.'

After a few attempt — and a lot of water up the nose — I finally make it round.

Halfway through the session, we move from our bellies to our feet — swapping bodyboarding for surfing. This is a far wobblier experience.

Unlike regular surfing, here you start standing up, eliminating frustrating falls before you're even on your feet. Matt holds my hand as I balance on a skateboard-sized float. He slowly guides me towards the jets of water.

'Bend your knees and relax,' he says, slowly releasing my death-grip. 'Ready? There you go.'

I last about three seconds before toppling over with an almighty splash. 'Don't worry about falling,' says Matt, as I inch towards him for another go. 'That's part of the fun. Relax and go with it.'

His words were like magic, because suddenly I'm standing on the board in the middle of the FlowRider, surfing.

OK, it's shaky and not stylish, but for 10 ungraceful seconds I feel like I'm owning the wave — something that can take months of practice to master in regular surfing.

As our hour of rolling around in water ends, I wave goodbye to my pint-size classmates with a grin — and wet hair — plastered on my face.

Turns out I might just be a big kid after all.

For more information, visit bodyflight.co.uk/surf