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NOT-SO-EASY RIDER

Matt Hambly takes a look at **Hardline**, one of the world's most challenging downhill mountain-biking courses

THINK about this for a second: Dan Atherton, a man who makes a living riding a bike off the side of a cliff, made the Red Bull Hardline course because the regular courses he rides in competitions are too restricted. That's right: navigating mountain spines less than a foot wide, with stomach-churning drops on either side, is not enough for Atherton and his pals. Neither is scrambling down hillside shale, searching desperately for grip, or flying off a ramp and taking both hands off the bars so that they can clap behind their backs.

Red Bull Hardline, you see, is a track that mixes mountain

biking disciplines and is specifically designed without limits in mind.

'Red Bull Hardline came around to show the world what the top riders could do. At a world cup you've got restrictions, but Hardline is about how gnarly the jumps are; it's about how technical the rock gardens are,' says Atherton about last year's event, held in the hills of mid-Wales. And although last year's event was shrouded in secrecy, this year's is open to the public. 'The plan has always been to bring the race back bigger than before,' says Atherton, 'and make it more of an event for fans to be part of. This year's edition looks set to do this.'

Hardline is intended to push its riders to the very edge of what they can do. There's no room for frippery here. Tricks go out of the window and in their place comes staggering concentration and a sharp intake of breath you don't realise you've taken until your body starts crying out for air and you remember you're supposed to be breathing. Lord knows what it's like if you're actually riding the thing. Well, the Lord knows and so do a collection of the world's best riders, who tested and rode the course in the inaugural competition last year. The general consensus appears to be 'terrifying'.

After a 20-minute Jeep uplift, the descent begins with a bog track that leads into treacherous woods. The course runs downhill,



adjacent to a waterfall, across The Slab, the track's first really technical obstacle, according to Atherton, before hitting Renegade, the first big jump. From there, it's onwards down the hill at relentless speed, slowing only to tackle further technical challenges. The course closes with a huge gap in the road, literally, that competitors have to fly over, before crossing the finish line. So daunting was the road gap that several riders rode round it in their heats until their last lap.

In short, as a spectator sport, this promises to be nothing short of spectacular. And if you still want more, Atherton has hinted that certain parts of the course, built in just six weeks last year, will be even more extreme than last year's. With all this in mind, the event, taking place on September 12 and 13 will see the cream of the mountain-biking crop return to the course in an attempt to beat their previous times and the course record. Currently held by English rider and multiple world-cup-winner Gee Atherton – Dan's brother – the Salisbury native came out on top with a time of 3:40. Even Dan Atherton, the evil genius behind the course, was beaten with a time of 3:48. Since the track is different this year, it will be impossible to compare finish times to last year, but the race against the clock is still very much on and you can be there to see all the action.

For more information visit: redbull.com/hardline

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TRI HARD



Triumph: Ellie gets the best of SupBikeRun
PICTURE: GARY COOPER

Ellie Ross takes on **SupBikeRun** and finds that it leaves most triathlons in the shade

IT'S WHEN I spot the cows ahead that I'm reminded this is no ordinary triathlon. I have just cycled up a bumpy track in the Peak District, flanked by lush green countryside. But after reaching the summit, I'm faced with the three unamused animals blocking my path.

Terrified of being charged, I yank on the brakes. To my left, a guy is already pushing his bike through the meadow, giving the cows a wide berth. 'We need to ride through them,' says Lucy Wilkinson, who I have just met and cycled with for the past few kilometres. Taking a deep breath, I focus on Lucy's back tyre as we roll downhill, barging our unexpected blockade out of the way before clicking through our gears and pushing on.

Welcome to SupBikeRun, a triathlon – but not as you know it. As with a regular 'tri', there are three consecutive disciplines and you wear timing chips. But in this version, traditional swimming has been replaced by SUP (stand-up paddle boarding) and the bike and run are set on off-road trails.

There is also a phased (instead of mass) start, so the atmosphere is more relaxed. I am one of 164 people signed up to the Carsington Water event, the third in the UK series. The format is simple: a 3km paddle, then 35km mountain bike ride, before a 5km trail run. I've always been curious about attempting a triathlon, but being a weak swimmer puts me off.

And I'm not alone. 'I don't fancy swimming in a cold lake,' Lucy says when I meet her and a friend at the feed station halfway through the mountain biking route. 'The SUP element really appeals and the distances are attainable. We wanted to push ourselves and improve our fitness without having to train for a year.'

Within moments of setting off on my SUP – two

laps of a triangular course on the reservoir – my shoulders ache and I regret doing no training. Happily for those who have never tried SUP, there are taster sessions held the day before the event. I propel myself through the water using a paddle, spotting swans as I go, and by the end of the course I feel I've mastered some sort of technique.

Once ashore, I sprint to the transition station, pull on trainers and a helmet and collect my metal steed for the mountain biking leg. Sam Lutman-Pauc, an ex-professional kite-surfer, set up SupBikeRun in 2014 after realising that this appealing format hadn't yet been done in Europe. He now plans to expand globally.

'We have had everyone from a hen party to a 16-year-old and his dad complete the event,' Sam says. 'Some people race, others do it for the achievement. It's a safer and more fun way of getting into triathlons.'

Although the event is not billed as a race (there is no podium finish and entrants are called 'participants' not 'competitors'), there are still those who aim for the top. But after two hours and 35km on a bike, the last thing I want to do is embark on a run. Purple-faced and dripping with sweat, I drain my water bottle and set off from the transition station. People who have already finished cheer me on as I jog with leaden legs past the reservoir and into the woods, where sunlight dapples the ground.

After what feels like a mammoth slog, I turn the final corner and spot the finish, using every last ounce of energy to cross the line. The sense of achievement far outweighs my throbbing muscles. A friendly event that combines three of my favourite sports, the odd cow and is not, officially, a race? Now that's my kind of triathlon.

The next SupBikeRun is at Westhampnett Lake, South Downs National Park, Sunday, September 20. Metro readers get an exclusive 25% off. See supbikerun.co.uk

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