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ON THE HUNT

Rachel Tarley discovers **Foxhunt**, the unique downhill race where amateur competitors are hunted down by a world champion



'I DIDN'T MAKE IT PAST ALL THE LADIES LAST YEAR, SO I NEED TO TAKE IT UP A LEVEL FOR 2015'

A GAINST the backdrop of the dramatic Pentland Hills just outside Edinburgh, something quite remarkable will happen later this month. Dozens of women will speed down the lush upland pastures on bikes, pursued by another woman, also on a bike. Only a few are likely to escape her – and if she has her way, no one will.

This is Red Bull's Foxhunt in association with Jeep, which returns once again in 2015, after moving to a female-only format for the first time last year. The fox huntress is racing cyclist Rachel Atherton, who will take on the foreboding challenge on September 26 and 27. The hunted hounds she chases are a somewhat eclectic bunch. Everyone from the teenaged to the middle-aged rode together en masse down the sprawling hillsides last year; mothers rode with daughters, friends spurred each other on and those who came alone focussed with dogged determination. The aim was to outride Atherton and it's no mean feat: the 27-year-old has been cycling since childhood and is a multiple national champion, specialising in downhill mountain bike racing. It's no wonder Foxhunt is her natural habitat.

'I am so excited about the return of Red Bull Foxhunt,' she says of this year's event. 'It's an opportunity for UK female mountain bikers to come together at an epic location, with an awesome atmosphere, to see if any of them can let the brakes go and hold me off long enough to not get caught.'

At the 2014 event, she made it past a staggering 100 of the 117 competitors, with an impressive 17-year-old, Enduro rider Elena Melton, finishing first, a whole eight seconds ahead of the next nearest competitor. This year, there will be even more hounds for Atherton to hunt down as 150 competitors take part in the mass start later this month.

Once again, the hounds will gather atop Caerketton Hill at

the beginning of the purpose-built track, taking in the view of Edinburgh, the Firth of Forth and the scenic Pentland Hills, before setting off at breakneck speed on their ascent as soon as they hear the shriek of the fox horn. Competing against the

current leader of the UCI downhill mountain bike World Cup series is every bit as hard as it sounds and the course itself doesn't make it any easier. The steep, tufty hillside course begins with off-camber turns and a fast straight peppered with crafty ruts designed to catch riders off-guard.

Tight-banked turns through heather lead participants over a rocky ledge and through grassy knolls, before they have to sprint across a golf green and into a root-strewn forest. The final stretch is open and grassy, but not without its challenges, as two jumps appear on the horizon for the more adventurous riders to tackle.

It's options like these – whether or not to attempt the jumps, as well as forks in the course where options A and B are available to the participants – that make Foxhunt such a diverse and inclusive event. 'It takes the pressure off racing because it's such a fun idea,' explains Atherton. 'It's awesome to see so many women here filled with such confidence.'

Foxhunt may have a reputation for being the friendliest MTB event around, but that doesn't mean huntress Atherton is planning to go easy on her fellow riders. 'I didn't make it past all the ladies last year, so I need to take it up a level for 2015,' she says.

Girls, you have been warned.



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Taking the plunge: Ellie learns to freedive
PICTURE: ALASTAIR SCARLETT

GOING UNDER

Ellie Ross takes a deep breath and heads underwater to discover freediving with a twist

I'M MAKING a cup of tea underwater. I go through the process – kettle on, milk out, teabag in mug – but it's all in my head. Going through this everyday routine helps take my mind off the fact that I've been lying face down in a swimming pool for over two minutes. This is my first taste of freediving – the art of diving while holding your breath – and Freedive UK instructor Ian Donald has just let me in to the secret of success.

'The most important thing is to relax,' he says, as I arrive at the Glendorgal Hotel in Newquay where the course is running. 'If you push away anxiety you'll stay down longer. Some people achieve this by thinking of a happy holiday memory, others use something boring – like their commute or making a cup of tea.' But there's nothing boring about this freediving lesson. By the end I will have transformed into a mermaid, complete with a tail that would leave Disney's Ariel green with envy. I've signed up to Britain's first mermaid course, designed to teach you how to glide effortlessly underwater like the mythical sea creature. Ian set it up after noticing a growing popularity for mermaids online. 'Mermaiding' has become so popular that it's now a profession, with Ariel-esque women being paid to model underwater and perform shows at aquariums, kids' parties and posh hotels.

As we pull on wetsuits and goggles, Ian explains: 'We wanted to change the view that freediving is frightening and show that it can be fun. It's very safe if you do it properly, with no risk of failing equipment. If being a mermaid gets more people into the sport, then that's a good thing.' But before I can so much as pick the colour of my tail, I need to sort out my breathing in preparation to go under. Ian divides the breath-holding process into thirds. In the first third of our time underwater, we learn how to feel comfortable.

During the second third, we get the urge to breathe as



carbon dioxide starts building up – this is when most people surface. If you resist this urge, you enter the third phase, feeling contractions in your breathing muscles (diaphragm and intercostal). This is a signal to come up. After floating on my back breathing calmly for two minutes, I go under. I come up before I mean to, my body's natural instinct to expel carbon dioxide overriding my mind's desire to stay down. But I keep going down and on my third attempt, I feel my diaphragm flex as I make it to two minutes and 39 seconds.

Next: how to swim like a mermaid. I slip my feet into a monofin (a two-foot single flipper), the same style used to break freediving world records. The idea is to engage your core and keep strong legs to create an undulating motion that begins at your outstretched hands and ends at the fin. But after a few laps with floats and then weight belts, I'm still struggling to make swimming with my feet together look effortless. Maybe a pink, scaly tail will help. Wearing it feels like I've squeezed both legs into the sleeve of a Lycra top and I wobble and hop my way back into the pool. A professional mermaid's job involves underwater modelling and as I give it a go, I discover that it's much harder than it seems.

Try opening your eyes underwater, ensuring that your hair's swirling in the right direction and making it all look natural and you'll see just how tricky it is. I exhale deeply to make my body heavy enough to sink to the pool floor and remain there. All the instructions begin to come together – I'm staying under for longer and am actually beginning to relax. As I make a final lap of the pool, I embrace my inner mermaid, diving down and gliding easily through the water with a flip of the tail that has replaced my legs. In my very own 'sea', I feel waves of calmness wash over me – this must be just how real mermaids feel.

Or maybe all that breath-holding's gone to my head.

Metro readers get 10% off any course of more than one day. Valid until September 26. See freediveuk.com