



OFF HOURS

Leisure pursuits for—and by—entrepreneurs

WHEN THE WEATHER TURNS CHILLY, MOST MOUNTAIN BIKERS push their bikes into the garage and keep them there until spring. For one biking devotee that wasn't good enough. Ray Petro, 39, a remodeling contractor in Cleveland who took up mountain biking nine years ago, wanted a place he could ride year-round, even during the worst Midwestern winters. So he built one himself. Petro invested his \$50,000 life savings and took out a \$25,000 loan to launch Ray's Mountain Bike Indoor Park, which opened in November 2004 in a warehouse just west of downtown. In the year since, his venture has been so successful that Petro has scaled back his contracting business to summers only; the other nine months he runs the park full-time. "I've gotten e-mails and calls from people," he says. "Some say, 'You stole my idea.' Others say, 'You're living my dream.'"



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Every month about 1,000 mountain bikers ride at Ray's, and most of them heard about the park from other customers. "I paid for some posters and stuff, but that's about it," Petro says of his modest marketing efforts. Several times last winter busloads of bikers arrived from Toronto. A local Holiday Inn offers a Weekend at Ray's special—\$59 for two nights, including entry to the park. The regular one-day rate is \$15, and so far Petro says he's on track to break even in two years.

One early skeptic of the idea was Joe Prisel, 33, a pro mountain biker from Parma, Ohio, who competes internationally (most recently in Peru) and builds courses for competitions across the U.S. "I heard the buzz, and I wanted to check

it out," Prisel says. "Actually, what I had heard is that this place would never work." But Prisel quickly became a believer—and the main architect of the course. The wooden ramps and obstacles look primitive, but Prisel used CAD software to design many of them, often tweaking the plans during the building process. Much of the construction was done by the Founders Club, a 12-man crew of Petro's mountain-biking buddies who helped him build and test the obstacles. In return for their labor, the Founders ride free.

The warehouse had been around for

BY THE NUMBERS

Size of park:
71,000 square feet

Number of jumps:
22

Highest jump:
Six feet

Depth of stunt pit:
Five feet

Foam cushion in pit:
2,400 cubic feet

Number of injuries in pit:
Zero

Oldest rider:
60

Youngest rider:
16

URBAN JUNGLE:
Prisel on the sport course, second hardest of three at Ray's

almost a century before Petro bought it in July 2004. It formerly housed a manufacturer of brakes and water pumps and, in the 1920s, silk mills that made parachutes for U.S. servicemen. Now bike racks line the loading-dock entrance, and a graffiti wall that customers sign in place of a guestbook is tattooed with the names, cities, and states they come

from—Chicago, Maine, and Pittsburgh, among others.

The 71,000-square-foot park is divided into three tracks and three stunt areas for bikers of varying abilities. A beginner's