

# Emergence of a New American Cycling Destination

Northwest Arkansas sits in a section of the Ozarks known as the Boston Mountains. These mountains are most dramatic at the southern end of the region, around Fayetteville, home of the University of Arkansas and one of the longest-running stage races in the U.S., the Joe Martin Stage Race. This stage race celebrated its 40th running last year and has grown to become an integral part of the USA Cycling pro tour and longest continuously accredited UCI pro race on U.S. soil.

Head north through Springdale and Rogers towards the other major communities in the region and the landscape levels into an unexpectedly flat plateau. On the northern end of this plateau is Bentonville, and heading further north into Bella Vista is a range of rolling hills similar to the Ardennes in southern Belgium. The area offers a little bit of everything in terms of cycling conditions and challenges, and so it is not entirely surprising that the area is starting to emerge as one of the new hotbed destinations of U.S. cycling.

The first efforts to develop mountain bike trails in the region started in the mid-2000s, and since then more than 400 miles natural-surface trails and paved paths have been created. Trail development has been the by-product of numerous regional public/private partnerships combined with the substantial generosity of the Bentonville-based Walton Family Foundation, which has provided in excess of \$70 million for trail development since 2007.

A watershed moment for Northwest Arkansas cycling came in 2016 when the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) World Summit was held in Bentonville. Since then, an increasing number of national-scale mountain bike events have been held in Northwest Arkansas, including the NICA National Directors' Conference, the Outerbike Festival, the [Epic Rides Off-Road Series](#) race, and multiple sessions of IMBA Trail Labs.

But the real coup came just months ago, when [Fayetteville was awarded the UCI World Cyclocross Championships](#) in January 2022. This event will elevate Northwest Arkansas onto the global cycling stage, and cycling supporters in the area intend to take maximum advantage of that opportunity.

As Brendan Quirk, Cycling Program Director of the Runway Group, an organization focused on quality-of-life initiatives and economic development in Northwest Arkansas, says, "It will be an amazing opportunity for us to celebrate our cycling culture, and to put on one heck of a party." The Runway Group serves as the gravitational center for the regional development work of Stuart and Tom Walton, two grandchildren of original Walmart founders. Quirk works closely with the Walton Family Foundation in cycling initiatives. Originally founded 30 years ago by Sam and Helen Walton, the foundation is a family-led organization working to create access to opportunity by improving K-12 education, protecting the environment and advancing the quality of life in its home region.

Jeremy Pate, a Program Officer for the Foundation, says, "In Northwest Arkansas, one of the foundation's key initiatives revolves around managing the rapid growth the region is experiencing in a way that preserves and enhances the existing urban fabric." A broader set of transportation and mobility choices is part of this effort, including plans to make the community amenable to all forms of bicycling transportation and events. Says Pate, "We are looking to preserve a sense of place, for both long-time

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residents, newcomers, and visitors to the area.”

Adds Quirk, “Our region has enormous natural beauty, the sort of rich culture you get with a major university town, and the impact of tech-driven Fortune 500 companies such as Walmart, Tyson Foods and J.B. Hunt. Runway has a wide variety of interests to expand our regional strengths — with a lot of emphasis on cycling and trails.”

Beyond that, the organization also sponsors a range of other arts and cultural interests, food and culinary education, and even aviation interests.

“In my cycling role, I spend time engaged with our portfolio of cycling businesses as well as working with the team to evaluate business opportunities in the cycling and outdoor space,” Quirk continues.

The Walton brothers are particularly involved with and helping to drive the various cycling initiatives.

“We spend a good bit of time with the foundation on philanthropic initiatives related to trails and cycling, green space preservation and the future of multi-modal transportation,” Quirk adds. “Tom and Steuart have encouraged us to push as hard as we can with cycling activities here in Northwest Arkansas. Their passion for cycling is off-the-charts, and in conversation, it’s abundantly clear how they believe in the transformative power of bicycles.” *[Editor’s Note: The two Walton brothers, through their private investment vehicle, also recently [acquired high-end British apparel maker Rapha](#), and a stake in the local bike manufacturer Allied, underlining their long-term commitment to the cycling industry.]*

The region is becoming well known for its work related to mountain biking and trails, but Quirk says, “We also have a ton of focus on cycling-as-transportation.” Interestingly, the Northwest Arkansas MSA (metropolitan statistical area, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau) was recently ranked number 14 in the country in terms of population growth. As a result, there is a considerable volume of new roads and transportation infrastructure being built.

“We’re working to ensure to the best of our ability that protected bike lanes and safe routes for pedestrians are part of these plans,” says Quirk.

Pate, a former city planner, points to studies which underline cycling’s already very significant contributions and support of the regional economy. In 2017, bicycling was estimated to provide \$137 million in economic benefits to the local economy, with 57% of all mountain bike rides on natural-surface trails completed by cyclists from outside the region. And it’s not just tourists that are participating in the biking boom. In 2017, residents of the area were estimated to have spent more than \$20 million a year on bicycling, and today, homes nearer to the major bike trails command as much as a \$15,000 price premium.

One piece of evidence for this is the way in which the Walmart corporation has included bike commuting into the planning process for their new international headquarters in Bentonville. This “Home Office” will soon be headquarters for some 15,000 employees along with thousands of vendors and visitors each week. Walmart is building this new campus in downtown Bentonville, and is engaging in various innovative projects to get its employees and visitors to travel there by bike, scooter, or on foot.

Asked about his vision for the longer-term future of the area, Foundation representative Pate says, “With the natural assets we have in Northwest Arkansas, and with the infrastructure the region is developing, we want to work with our local partners to build one of the prime cycling destinations in the world — and it doesn’t matter what kind of bike you are talking about.”

With three Fortune 500 corporate offices headquartered in the region and other major companies coming

into the area, Pate says he can see the day where it becomes almost mundane to be able to jump on a bike and go anywhere in the area. “It’s already happening,” he says. “We’re close to nature here — within one minute of downtown, you can be on a singletrack trail.

“We envision a day where it will not be unusual in the business community to see someone walking into a meeting, a bit sweaty and carrying a bike helmet.”

The Walton Family Foundation has led much of the cycling innovation in Northwest Arkansas, but it also provided support to organizations like the Northwest Arkansas Trailblazers and Bike NWA that have also been very active. Quirk speaks highly of these non-profit groups. “The vibe inside these organizations is no different from what you see at start-up businesses. They’re very mission-driven and tirelessly energetic for the outcomes they’re devoted to,” he says. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my role, it’s that when it comes to intensity level, strategic thinking, or the ability to make a real impact — there’s not much difference between the great for-profit companies and the non-profit ones.”

A nearly lifelong Arkansan himself, Quirk sounds like one-man chamber of commerce presentation for the area: “There are some great folks in the cycling industry who are taking advantage of our amazing trails and vibe to put on the sorts of events that will eventually bring loads of people here.”

Another recent example was Outerbike, an expanding three-day bicycling tech and demo event. It was held in Bentonville in October 2018, the first time that it wasn’t held in either Colorado or Utah. “And lo and behold,” says Quirk, “it was the biggest turnout of attendees they ever had. The top state for attendance was Texas, and California was number three. I think they said we had people from 48 states and 6 countries? Yes, our trails are that awesome.”

As mentioned, the acquisition of the 2022 World Cyclocross Championships represented a quantum leap forward and a huge boon for the overall development of the area as a cycling destination. According to long-time cyclocross race organizer Brook Watts, who was instrumental in bringing the event to Northwest Arkansas, and who will serve as race director, “It all came down to the desire to jumpstart the process with an eye on the biggest prize — a World Championships. We presented a multi-year strategic plan to build cyclocross in the region, focused on fostering a ‘cross culture in the region leading up to 2022. The intent of the strategic plan was also to create a halo effect of a World Championship event, to produce a legacy that an event of this stature will have for years following the January 2022 races.”

Notwithstanding all of these early accomplishments, the regional development groups also have many additional plans for further infrastructure and promotional work in the future. For example, the Razorback Regional Greenway (a 37-mile paved path from Bella Vista to Fayetteville) has become an important spine of a larger regional cycling transportation network. Quirk says even more mileage is planned for this connected network of bike trails, and a lot more “green paint” down the roads. He says there are numerous people working on this challenge, and that the state and local governments are becoming increasingly open to dialogue about the region’s cycling future.

Runway is also trying to figure out how to best stimulate and incubate a cycling-related entrepreneurial culture in the area — to help incentivize an organic, start-up bike industry culture to take root in the area. [Allied](#) is a perfect example. Quirk says he thinks of cycling as being a critical foundation, one that can be built upon to evolve the region into a dynamic and magnetic destination for talented young folks — like a Boulder or an Austin.

“We want to be a Boulder with loads of world-class trails, fewer traffic headaches, and a lot more affordable housing,” he says.

For a long time, mountain biking in Northwest Arkansas was considered one of the sport’s “best-kept

secrets” but according to Quirk, now it has broken through to become more of a bucket-list type of destination. Events like the Epic Rides [Oz Trails Off-Road](#) are gaining in national visibility and popularity, and the Runway Group is looking to identify and attract more of those sorts of events to help continually build the region’s profile on the national stage.

“While people might scratch their heads before their first trip to Northwest Arkansas when they leave they’re always converts,” Quirk says. “The trails, the art, the food & beer — we know they’ll be back!”

And the whole plan is not just geared to tourists coming into the area, it is also directed toward the region’s local residents.

“The buzz from the local community has been very positive. In the last decade or so there’s been a broad recognition by NWA residents that change is positive, they seem to be less resistant to change than other areas,” Watts says.

The World Championships have strong support from the City of Fayetteville, as well as the University of Arkansas. The Organizing Committee has an advisory board with prominent regional representatives who support the effort. Says Watts, “This park will be purpose-built for events like World Cup and World Championship but it’ll also serve as a place local residents can visit throughout the year to ride challenging trails or simply enjoy a natural setting, just a stone’s throw from the downtown area and a major public university. Everyone wants this to succeed.”

There is something still wild and free about Northwest Arkansas, and folks who live there appreciate the natural beauty, and cultural the and community assets which are being rapidly developed. Many there envision a future in which it’s considered to be one of the most desirable places to live in America.

“For an Arkansan — especially one who loves bikes as much as me,” says Quirk, “it’s the most meaningful, interesting work I can imagine. This job just feels like something I’ve been destined to do.”

*Steve Maxwell, April 3, 2019*