

THE ENDURO FACTOR

Off-Road Goes Mainstream At X Games 17

Story By Chris Denison And Shan Moore • Photos By Steve Cox And Drew Ruiz

One million, nine hundred and forty-five thousand. That massive figure represents the average number of astonished viewers who tuned into the live telecast of the final day of action at X Games 17 to witness the inaugural Enduro-X event. In the history of Summer X, this was ESPN's second most-viewed live broadcast...ever. As that energetic signal blasted into countless living rooms across America, it exposed nearly two million viewers to the newest, most exciting thing to hit the world of off-road motorcycle racing. And they loved it.

Since the very first event rocked Las Vegas in 2004, EnduroCross has evolved into both a legitimate AMA series and a unique, recognizable sport. With 24 successful pre-X events to its credit and a strong cast of racers, teams and sponsors behind it, it was only natural for EnduroCross to become a part of the biggest alternative sports event on earth. While it didn't happen overnight, the eventual transformation of EnduroCross into "Enduro-X" confirmed the event's place next to skate, BMX and freestyle motocross as the next big thing in action sports. The question was, how would the public react to this notoriously grueling yet extraordinarily exciting form of racing?

As you certainly now know, Enduro-X was a complete home run for all parties involved: Fans loved it for the thrilling racing and slow-yet-exciting crashes and lead changes; racers loved the chal-

lenge, newfound recognition and mainstream interest; sponsors loved the exposure that the event gave them; the folks at ESPN loved the huge ratings the telecast received. Without a doubt, the huge success of Enduro-X can be largely attributed to the breathtaking nature of the racing and the proven, time-tested structure of the event itself that made for a seamless integration with the televised component.

But beyond the amount of exposure, the ratings scores and the sponsorship dollars, a significant and nonquantifiable benefit emerged after X Games: EnduroCross was suddenly cool. Racers who had previously spent their entire lives banging bars in the middle of nowhere now found themselves swapping paint on a global stage. People who never even knew that women raced off-road suddenly became huge fans of Maria Forsberg and the rest of the hard-charging females. And Taddy Blazusiak, the super-talented hard enduro star with a knack for nasty terrain, grabbed a gold medal at what turned out to be the most-watched, most-talked-about event of the X Games. In describing the positive effects the event had on off-road in terms of increased public awareness, Enduro-X silver medalist Mike Brown summed it up perfectly: "People are always asking what EnduroCross is, and now they know. Why? I think it's because everyone in the world watched X Games."



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TADDY BLAZUSIAK
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"I think EnduroCross and off-road made a big step by being a part of the X Games. It is good for riders and the sponsors of the sport to be seen by that many people. Just that single race was so big, and X Games is everywhere, in Poland and in Europe. My friends were watching it on TV all around the world." —Taddy Blazusiak, reigning Enduro-Cross champion and Enduro-X Gold Medalist



"X Games was huge for our sport. Like all the other disciplines in X Games, like freestyle, skate, BMX, that's their pinnacle event of the year, so to see EnduroCross as one of those extreme events is huge. Obviously a lot of people saw it and hopefully it can be a springboard for more exposure for EnduroCross."

—EnduroCross star and 10-time AMA trials champion Geoff Aaron

"I always thought that the sport could get to this level, but I didn't think it would get there so soon. It definitely increased the awareness of EnduroCross, and it touched into the mainstream like the sport never has so far. With the track, we didn't have any choice but for the build to go perfect, and it did. It turned out good. We couldn't have asked for any better help, it really came together smoothly." —Shane Schaeffer, Big Cheese, Schaeffer Tracks

"I never thought I'd see off-road racing on such a big, mainstream stage as X Games. It's going to raise the whole bar, because it's an extreme sport that's a combination of a couple sports—motocross, trials, enduro, off-road. It wraps all that stuff into one big package and puts it in front of the public eye. Everybody enjoys EnduroCross, too, because there's constantly some action going on somewhere on the track, and I think that's the big thing that people like to see in racing." —Multi-time ISDE Gold Medalist Jeff Fredette



"Before EnduroCross, off-road racing was not spectator-friendly. Half the time you're out in the middle of nowhere, and people don't want to come out and watch one rider come by every 10 minutes. But look at what Enduro-X at X Games did: It gave the riders good recognition to the world, to let people know that this is a skill we have, this is what we do and we're the real deal. As far as my sponsors go, it's a proud moment for me to be able to represent the people who help me and let me live my dream, and to then give them worldwide exposure. In that aspect it's just an honor to be involved. Everybody wants to win, but I'm just happy to come out of the very first X Games Enduro-X with a medal. That's something I'm going to have for the rest of my life."

—Enduro-X Bronze Medalist Justin Soulé



"Before Enduro-X at X Games, people would ask what I was racing that weekend, and when I said, 'I'm going to EnduroCross' they really had no idea what it was. But once X Games put it live on TV it became a much, much bigger deal. It's a huge step for the sport, and I think it's the biggest thing that ever happened to off-road. For me, it's so cool to have an X Games medal at 39 years old! And the silver medal was fun, but I'm going for gold next year."

—Enduro-X Silver Medalist Mike Brown



"It's good to see so many more guys competing at a higher level, and it's great to have a new aspect of two-wheel off-road racing. It is a spectator sport now, and you really miss that in GNCC and cross-country-type racing. It's definitely cool for everybody. These off-road riders are so accessible, too. You can meet them after the race, get their autographs and it's not always like that in other sports." —Rik Smits, EnduroCross fanatic, racer and former Indiana Pacers NBA player



"X Games was so awesome. It's funny, I could tell that all of us off-roaders weren't used to the media and the attention and the free food at X Games; we're not usually treated like rock stars! I told people at work that I'd be racing in Los Angeles that weekend, but they had no idea what it was all about. For them to see me on live TV at X Games was just the most entertaining thing ever! People who aren't familiar with off-road were so intrigued by Enduro-X, it's seriously the best spectator sport you've ever seen."

—Maria Forsberg, Women's X Games Enduro-X Gold Medalist

"All I've got to say is that when I went to X Games, the guys let me walk the track and I literally crapped my pants. I just knew there was no way I could do one lap around the track! Everyone had been trying to get me to check the race out, and when I saw it at X Games I was just hooked. I think the sport is going to just blow up now. I would love to see [Chad] Reed, [James] Stewart and [Kevin] Windham do Enduro-X next year. Trust me, I'm going back and I'm telling K-Dub he's got to come race this. Imagine if down the road we could get those big-name guys to race it! It's gonna be huge."

—Dano Legere, Moto team manager, DVS





The Father Of Modern EnduroCross



Eric Peronnard didn't invent indoor enduro racing, but he did bring it to America, create a thrilling (and marketable) package, invite the best riders on Earth and build a leading off-road series out of it that we now know as EnduroCross. The driving force behind EnduroCross' inclusion in the X Games—as well as the founder of the MiniMoto SX, the U.S. Open of Supercross and several other major events—Peronnard has single-handedly helped elevate the sport of off-road to previously unthinkable levels.

How did the concept of EnduroCross as an X Games event begin?

Well, I had a dream... In 2005, I invited the X Games people to witness the second annual EX in Las Vegas, and they loved it! Of course, it took over five years after that first meeting to see EnduroCross at the X Games, but oddly enough it also took five years to make the first U.S. Open of SX happen. Patience and perseverance are virtues I have been learning... slowly.

What were you expecting going into the first Enduro-X event?

Expectations are not my forte. Instead, fear of failure was the driving force! I had a lot of meetings with ESPN, just really trying to understand their culture and make sure everything was perfect. I was also on site a week before the event checking and rechecking everything! I wasn't sleeping and was so anxious; this is not rocket science, but it requires a lot of attention. Fortunately, I had the chance to sneak away and ride some enduro with my friends the weekend before just to clear my mind and put it all in perspective.

The inclusion of the women's class was contentious but, ultimately, it made for insane TV. What are your thoughts on this segment of the sport?

The women's class was unreal. We tried it a second time in Everett, Washington, at the second round of the series, and the result was the same: People on their feet, standing ovations, awesome response. The public just loves it. Some people did not appreciate it, but meanwhile Maria Forsberg is in *Rolling Stone* magazine and the last time I checked the women's race recap on YouTube it was at 1.2 million views! For the few critics who did not appreciate the courage of the female racers, I would just challenge them to get a bike and enter an amateur EnduroCross. I guarantee they would show respect after that! Watching riders like Taddy Blazusiak would lead you to believe that EnduroCross is easy, but trust me, it is not. Taddy is from another planet and in my mind is the best off-road rider in the world. Period!

The Enduro-X track inside the Staples Center was built in less than 10 hours, which is astonishing. What did it take to pull that off?

Simply put, it took a lot of energy drinks and the best people around! Honestly it was hard and intense, but big thanks to our team for pulling it off. I almost got beheaded by one of our guys with an axe—"almost" is the key word and I was OK, but that kept me from falling asleep!

What are your thoughts on the way the results ended up?

I honestly felt like everything was in its proper place. EX is very hard and you do not improvise it. Yet, kudos to my buddy Eric Sorby for showing so much heart and talent; with a bit of luck he could have been in the final! Did I mention that you need luck in EnduroCross?

What do you think Enduro-X's inclusion in the X Games did for off-road racing and for EnduroCross as a series?

It is unreal and we have seen only the tip of the iceberg; a lot more is coming with time! I just know that EnduroCross was seen in Poland, Canada, the "Today Show" on NBC and even on the "George Lopez Show" (although disrespectfully). The mainstream got shocked by EX in a good way, and it will help a lot!

As the driving force behind EnduroCross, you must be one proud parent to see your idea grow into a full-on X Games event!

The day after was fantastic, kind of like the day after the first U.S. Open 13 years ago when my wife and I could not believe what we had done. However, this one was different because I think the X Games Enduro-X will help the sport more than the U.S. Open helped SX in '98! I sincerely think we will be back next year at X Games. We knew EnduroCross was good, but the race at X was very, very, very good and it got even the least enthusiastic fans on their feet! I cannot thank ESPN enough for the chance they gave us.



Men's Enduro-X highlights at <http://www.endurocross.com/?p=3431>

Women's Enduro-X highlights at <http://www.endurocross.com/?p=3449>