

The Story of ROCK LOBSTER

[00:00:00] From Talking Mouths.

[00:00:06] STIAN LANGBAKK: My name is Stian Langbakk and I'm 12 years old. This summer, I probably rode Rock Lobster 30 times. I usually ride this trail with my friend Mavic or Johannes or Kolya and Papa.

[00:00:29] BRENT LANGBAKK: This Rock Lobster trail is a family favorite. The kids were talking non-stop about this trail. We had a kind of joke in our house that my partner was sick and tired of hearing about Rock Lobster at the dinner table.

[00:00:47] STIAN LANGBAKK: And she also said that she doesn't want to hear about it at work.

[00:00:53] BRENT LANGBAKK: She works with Brian Horton, who is one of the trail builders. So, she would hear about Rock Lobster at work and then she would hear about it at home at our dinner table as well.

The trail is really built with this idea of progression.

In the spot that we're standing, there's the top drop, but there's also a roll called the C-Line, which is still, you know, a pretty difficult feature. And this is the one where I worked up the nerve to be able to do it. I'm happy to, to do it now, but then also there's ride-arounds on the features, too. So, you know, if I'm not feeling it that day and just want to cruise through, then I can do the ride-arounds.

[00:01:38] STIAN LANGBAKK: At the beginning, I was scared of Bucktooth, Top Drop, Department of Shred and Squamcoover. And Mega-slab. Yeah, Bucktooth is still a bit scary, but I can ride them all now.

[00:01:55] BRENT LANGBAKK: It was nerve-wracking to see the kids go over these bigger features, but at the same time, they just got so much joy out of it. It was something that got them outside and they were active in doing things and that was super cool. So, it became something we were actually encouraging them to do.

[00:02:15] STIAN LANGBAKK: There's so many features, and even if you have hit all the features, there's normally a different line you can do on the features. You can always progress and get better. I just feel like, I don't know.... I really like this trail.

[00:02:31] BRENT LANGBAKK: Nice one, kiddo.

[00:02:36] MARK: You're listening to Every Trail tells a Story.

In this series, we explore the origins of our favorite Yukon trails. Guided by the dreamers, planners, bushwhackers, builders, obsessive personalities and, yes, the rogues who brought these trails to life.

In this episode, Rob McConnell, Brian Horton and Marcus Waterreus share their memories of building one of Whitehorse's newest and most challenging mountain bike trails.

This is the story of Rock Lobster.

[00:03:26] ROB MCCONNELL: The Unclimbable Rock, Concussion Rock, Flying Squirrel, the Toilet Bowls, Entrance Drop, the Molar Rollers, Dental Rock [Bucktooth], Mega-slab, Squamcoover, Exit Rock, Department of Education, [Department of Shred], Chainsaw Rock, B52, the Whale Tail, Gratoli Drops....

[00:03:44] BRIAN HORTON: It's like a string of pearls. There's little features built all the way along. There are features that we didn't know were even in here when we started. And now they're mainstays of the whole trail.

[00:03:57] ROB MCCONNELL: The kids named most of the features. Actually, we just named the features so that we knew where to meet everyone for building.

Rob McConnell. Born and raised in New Zealand, but moved to Canada in 2004 and moved to the Yukon then. My preference for riding is anything hard, but I'll ride anything anytime, really. I think without trails and access to trails, I wouldn't remain in the Yukon. Putting it simply, trails are like a key part of my life.

[00:04:46] BRIAN HORTON: I grew up on the trails of Riverdale, for running and biking, and then Mount Mac for cross country skiing. And I've taken a lot of enjoyment out of the trail network throughout my life. It's good for my mental health. It's good for my physical health. It's one of those things that's been a constant throughout my upbringing and still now, as my kids start to become mountain bikers and runners and skiers in their own right.

So, my name is Brian Horton. I work at Yukon University. I'm no great rider, but I'm able to ride most of the stuff in town. And one of the goals building Rock Lobster was to give myself something that I couldn't ride.

[00:05:32] ROB MCCONNELL: We actually wanted to build an up track to connect onto, like the Collective or something like that. And we were really keen to have that so we could get off the ski trails essentially and not have such a boring commute to the singletrack.

[00:05:51] BRIAN HORTON: The build got started with a few friends and I sort of walking through the forest in the vicinity of the KK Connector near the top of KK Hill here at Mount Mac, in a band where it's part of the old Copper Belt and there's rock everywhere and there's all sorts of cool stuff, you know. Relatively steep terrain. And so, myself, Rob McConnell and Marcus Waterreus were all sort of interested in the same area... and others as well.

[00:06:22] ROB MCCONNELL: I recall Brian and I being on the same page and then sort of trying to involve Marcus. I know that he had an enthusiasm to build out there as well.

[00:06:34] MARCUS WATERREUS: And then it was Rob and myself and Jan, who was the manager of the ski club. We did a walk-around. And I think initially Rob was thinking of just getting an easy trail so he could get access, winter access, to the trails in behind here. But then we started to notice a lot of the rock features in and around this area and thought, "Wow, this has a lot of potential for something more."

[00:07:05] ROB MCCONNELL: And we were like, "Oh, my goodness, this cannot be an up-track. Look at this." So, it morphed pretty quickly into the vision of, well, let's have a double black or a black diamond downhill trail connected by a whole bunch of singletrack cross country stuff. So, you know, the idea of Rock Lobster sort of morphed and changed its vision once we saw what was available to us.

[00:07:36] MARCUS WATERREUS: Yeah, I'm a BNR here in Whitehorse. Marcus Waterreus. I won't tell you how long ago, because I would give away my age. I'm a member of the ski club and the ski club board, and—

[00:07:52] BRIAN HORTON: All of the people that have been involved are cross-country skiers as well. Rob, Marcus and I got together and really started the ball rolling in terms of going through the process with the City and with the Contagious Mountain Bike Club.

[00:08:06] ROB MCCONNELL: We had a common vision. I think that's what stuck us together. We had a common vision of "Let's create something that's really hard so that in future generations they're going to be able to say, 'Okay, well that's the limit now, let's increase it, or let's get really good at riding harder stuff.'" So, we wanted to have sort of a barometer in Whitehorse that was comparable, say, if you went to a Squamish or, you know, a Fernie or a Golden, then, you know, our black diamond here would be comparable, hopefully to what you get down there.

So, we started Rock Lobster in 2018. We managed to get it through the city application process and Brian and Marcus were the chief ones behind that.

[00:08:59] BRIAN HORTON: We spent about a year scoping the lines. It wasn't like we were doing it every single day from nine till five. But, yeah, we sort of picked away at it.

[00:09:09] MARCUS WATERREUS: I used to do a bit of mapping through my work, and so I used that aspect of my career to help the cause and put together a map that was part of the application. That was where I came in, and also helping to plan some of the features.

[00:09:33] ROB MCCONNELL: So, we had three main building seasons with Rock Lobster. We focused on the bottom third to begin with, and then we moved basically backwards up the mountain and completed the middle section. And then in the third season, 2020, we connected the top section to The Collective. I think Brian's determination and Marcus's steady influence and maybe my enthusiasm, we all meshed together well. Brian could talk me down off stuff that I was pretty determined to happen. And sometimes he was like, "Well, no, actually this is a better way." So, I needed a good, strong influence like that. Otherwise, it may have got a little bit out of hand.

[00:10:18] BRIAN HORTON: We were able to talk to some folks, Paul Burbidge and Joe De Graff and some of the really experienced trail builders while we were beginning the build here and give us some feedback. We just picked away at it and we all sort of contributed where we could. I mean, one of the major issues was just finding the time, right? So, almost all of the builders are parents, and, you know, the kids can't come every night to build and we've got jobs and all that sort of goodness.

[00:10:48] KIERAN HORTON: My name is Kieran Horton. So, usually when he went out building, as long as it wasn't after dinner, I would come with him. And sometimes, I try to sneak in a few friends with his permission, of course, but still, yeah.

[00:11:20] ROB MCCONNELL: The rumor about child labor, and us using child labor to make Rock Lobster, is totally true. I would say that they're responsible for at least half of the labor. They're certainly responsible for the energy and inspiring the adults to get back out there. For sure. Every single Thursday, it was trail building night, and those kids were there. It was just so amazing. It was actually the parents that would often be dragged out there after a hard day at work. 15 kids carrying weapons into the bush. Random kids crossing the highway with chainsaws and saws and axes.

[00:12:08] BRIAN HORTON: We've had some really keen builders as well. James Mitchell, Colin Abbott.

[00:12:12] ROB MCCONNELL: Colin Abbott and James Mitchell and Adam McDougall. They were kind of the second and third wave of enthusiastic volunteers. And they sort of brought a whole bunch of people with them as well. And James Mitchell, although not initially part of the setup crew, was a massive, massive influence and energy on this trail. He was ever-present. He and Colin Abbott made, in my opinion, the best-made feature on the trail. It's a rock step up, affectionately called the Department of Education... "Department of Shred." I will not go too much into that—to protect James and Colin. Entrance Drop is about a four-foot drop gap, sort of into a hip jump. And Colin Abbott and Matthias Purdon really took that on. B52: Scott Keeseey and Marcus built that feature.

[00:13:21] MARCUS WATERREUS: I think when it came down to it, we all worked well together and came around to seeing each other's viewpoints, and I think it worked really well.

[00:13:30] ROB MCCONNELL: Marcus was the steady rock. You know, he was pretty constant there with his dogs.

[00:13:36] BRIAN HORTON: Hey, it's Marcus. Marcus, your timing is perfect. Do you want to do an interview?

[00:13:43] MARCUS WATERREUS: No, not really.

[00:13:44] ROB MCCONNELL: And, you know, working with Brian was pretty inspiring. The guy's pretty strong and can lift a lot of rocks and was always reliable and usually brought at least three to four kids with him. So that was a lot of fun.

I think my main contribution to the Rock Lobster project was my kids. They were ever-present, and I was a pretty good crash test dummy. I tested most of the features out first, which was sometimes fun, sometimes not.

[00:14:33] *The Lone Eagle, his achievement was not speed but daring. For that, he was admired.*

[00:14:40] BRIAN HORTON: So, one of the first build nights was building the Chainsaw Rock, so-named because Rob decided to ride down it holding the chainsaw in one hand. And it was just this, you know, classic scene of Rob McConnell, the crazed Kiwi on his mountain bike with a chainsaw.

[00:15:00] ROB MCCONNELL: I won't say yes or no whether it was running, because that's a little bit stupid. But the whole story was I wanted to show the kids how the rock slabs are actually some of the easiest features you can ride. They just *look* intimidating.

[00:15:16] BRIAN HORTON: That memory sticks with me, for sure. And there's been lots of other sort of fun times out here for me.

[00:15:21] MARCUS WATERREUS: One night that stood out in particular was everyone just salivating over all the possibilities and acting like a bunch of kids.

[00:15:29] ROB MCCONNELL: There's one particular feature that brings a smile to my face every single time. And I call it the Toilet Bowl or the S-Bends. It's the last feature of the top section. It's pretty unique to

Whitehorse. It's kind of a double berm that's linked together and it brings a memory, or a happy memory, because everyone was involved. There were between 12 and 14 people on that one site for a couple of days. We were clearing willows and moving dirt. And it was just a really a great community effort. It also reminds me of a trail feature in a place in New Zealand that I love to ride. So, every single time I ride it, I sort of get exported back to New Zealand in my mind. And it's just a beautiful trail feature. And just a lovely memory every time.

I think the naming of the trail was going to be one of the hardest decisions.

[00:16:33] BRIAN HORTON: I've always thought, "Oh, you need to name the trail as you're building it." Like, you come up with the name on a build night. And that's not how it worked. That's one of the things that you're supposed to include on the application to the city.

[00:16:44] ROB MCCONNELL: Rock Lobster.

[00:16:45] MARCUS WATERREUS: Rock Lobster.

[00:16:46] BRIAN HORTON: Rock Lobster.

[00:16:51] ROB MCCONNELL: Brian just threw that out there for the application.

[00:16:55] BRIAN HORTON: Yeah, it's totally named after the song.

[00:16:58] MARCUS WATERREUS: I remember it from high school and university. Brian must have been inspired by old rock.

[00:17:03] BRIAN HORTON: There's lots of rock on this trail. And so we thought, no, I don't know. It's just sort of a spontaneous, "Oh, rock. Rock Lobster." And then, you know, we named it after the B-52s. So, there is a B-52 drop. We figured we need to have a, you know, a clear reference to the band.

[00:17:25] ROB MCCONNELL: No one in our group is B-52's fan, as far as I know.

[00:17:30] BRIAN HORTON: I'm surprised that the name stuck. It was meant as a gag, but it's not going away anytime, it looks like.

[00:17:42] ROB MCCONNELL: No. There was certainly no love shack considered being built. Although, yeah, it is a nice place to camp.

[00:17:57] BRIAN HORTON: We've had a lot of fun building this together. There's been loads of folks from Takhini who have all come out. We've got lots of families and kids who have contributed. The kids have come up and swung a shovel around and picked out lines and that sort of thing. So, it's actually been a real blast as a family activity.

[00:18:20] ROB MCCONNELL: I live in Takhini. Brian lives in Takhini North as well. And it was interesting... one of the comments I got when I built Rock Lobster was, "Isn't it convenient that the trail ends in your backyard?" And I was like, "Yeah, damn right it is. That's how we planned it." And that's the beauty of the application process. If you want a trail that finishes in *your* backyard, then you just got to put in the work and go to the city and get it approved and then build it.

[00:18:49] BRIAN HORTON: The terrain took us there as well. But yeah, there's definitely a bit of self-interest at heart.

[00:18:54] MARCUS WATERREUS: Hillcrest is still pretty accessible to the Mount Mac trails, but not closer to Rock Lobster than Takhini. They can do quick rides after dinner. For me, I gotta work a little harder to get here.

[00:19:05] ROB MCCONNELL: Yeah, so poor Marcus doesn't have the trail finishing in his backyard. But that's okay. He rides it frequently, too.

CMBC had a really important part to play in the building and creation of Rock Lobster. We independently wouldn't have got the approval to build the trail. Sammy Salter and Colin McCann really moved it forward. Colin McCann has been a huge supporter. On opening night, he turned up and took photos and brought fake champagne and we cut a ribbon and made it really, really special for the kids. And that was a really nice touch.

And regrets?

[00:19:56] BRIAN HORTON: Yeah, I don't know.

[00:19:57] ROB MCCONNELL: Yeah, I do have some regrets about Rock Lobster. I think that the relationship between CMBC and the city and I was strained. Probably, I was just too pig-headed and wanted to build something really, really hard without having any compromise. Whereas I could have been a little bit more amenable in terms of signage and not building ridiculously hard features. I think I could have toned it down a bit.

So, the signage on Rock Lobster is interesting. It was imperative that people really knew what they were getting into. This does legitimately have some black diamond features. And the fear was that people would get into it and not know what they were getting into. So, the amount of signage which was put up... I have to be honest, I'm not a fan favorite of the signage—for me, it takes away from the nature of the trail. But I'm not stupid, and I realize that in order for the trail to be open and be safe for all people that the signage needed to be up.

[00:21:10] BRIAN HORTON: Bones will be broken on this trail. Unfortunately, it's definitely outside of the norm of the lower trails on Mount Mac. Whatever protective equipment you can put on is likely good planning. Dental Rock... I'm terrified of Dental Rock. We found the lower jaw of a moose at Dental Rock. And that's why it's got its name. Mega-slab is also pretty steep, but it's got a good run out. And Dental Rock is very steep and has a hook to the right, right at the bottom. So, yeah, I don't know. I'm scared.

[00:22:02] ROB MCCONNELL: Last count, we had over 30 youth involved and I think I tallied it out close to 1500 hours of volunteer hours from just those youth alone.

[00:22:24] MARCUS WATERREUS: Don't do it alone. Collaborate. I think it really is a good move. I think you get a lot of perspective and you'll probably end up with a better trail than you had anticipated.

[00:22:38] ROB MCCONNELL: You know, the whole idea of this project being available and usable by the community was one of our visions and it's what actually happened.

[00:22:55] BRIAN HORTON: The kids that have been involved in this have so many memories from this build. Regardless of what people think of the trail, I'm really proud of the work that went into it and the work that the kids did and the memories that we've helped them come to. And I really am excited to see them learn to ride it because in the last 10 years, mountain biking has gone up and up and up, and these kids are riding that wave. So, I'm really excited to see them riding this after they helped build it.

[00:23:40] KIERAN HORTON: Like, sometimes, I'm a little bit selfish and say it's like "my trail." I can definitely work up to most of the features. On a scale of one to ten, on average, I'd be about from six to eight and a half. Fun factor.

[00:24:16] MARK: Every Trail Tells a Story is 100% made in Yukon by Talking Mouths. Theme music is Blue Ska by Kevin MacCleod. Please leave a rating wherever you get your podcasts. Better yet, write a review. You can also leave comments on the episode page at talkingmouths.com. A big shout out once again to everyone who contributed to this oral history.

Thanks for listening.

[00:24:53] ROB MCCONNELL: One of my biggest injuries ever on a bike was on Porcupine Ridge, right? So, I think the nature of being on a bike is dangerous regardless of where you are. When you get comfortable is when you get hurt. So, you know, doing Porcupine Ridge or maybe Boogaloo or even up tracks, you feel relaxed. And that's when things really, you know.... I've heard of just as many people getting injured on blue to green trails, for sure.

[00:25:22] MARK: I'm pretty sure Geof Harries once broke his ankle riding off a curb.

[00:25:26] ROB MCCONNELL: Yeah, I heard that Geof Harries has actually broke his ankle riding off a curb. So, there you go.

[00:25:33] MARK: Did you actually hear that?

[00:25:34] ROB MCCONNELL: No, I don't know if it's true. I'm just repeating what you said.