

# QA Mark Peterson Wants to Inspire More Advocacy Support

BY JASON NORMAN

FERNDALE, WA—"Hell yeah!"

That was Mark Peterson's response when asked by a Kona sales rep if he was interested in interviewing for an available position more than a decade ago. The rest is history and hard work.

"Here I am, headed into my 13th year with Kona, and damn happy about it," said Peterson, sponsorship/athlete coordinator and advocacy director for Kona.

The road to his current role, however, wasn't always easy. Like many, Peterson was introduced to the industry as a bike assembler for a shop. "That was back well before the 95-percent pre-assembled days," Peterson said. "We pulled pretty much the whole bike apart. It was a great way to learn how to work on bikes."

Peterson's first foray into advocacy came at Washington's Padden MTN Pedal race many years ago. Since the venue was a city park, Peterson's advocacy mentor, the infamous Mountain Bike Hall of Famer Jim Sullivan, knew much of the trail system would have to be upgraded in order to make it passable for more than 400 racers.

"I got a first-hand account of working with city parks, the red tape and



Mark Peterson

ultimately the successes, too," Peterson said. "I'm proud to say the race is now in its 15th year and still run on the same course in the same city park."

In 1996 some heated trail access issues came to light in Washington's Whatcom County. Many of the public meetings and discussions were held during normal business hours. Peterson said he felt guilty about taking up the debate on company time.

"A big push was needed in order to keep mountain bikes on the trails," Pe-

terson said. "It didn't seem like anyone else was going to or could step up."

That's when Peterson approached Kona founders and owners Jake Heilbron and Dan Gerhard about doing more advocacy work.

"Over time it just grew into what it is now. I give them both a ton of credit for letting me run with it and making advocacy something that works for myself and Kona," Peterson said. "I have no doubt I wouldn't be as passionate as I am today without Dan and Jake's sin-

cere involvement. It helps to be in an environment where you have the tools to succeed."

Peterson offered a tongue-in-cheek response on what advocacy means to him. "We have a saying for our local club: Some people have money but no time. Some people have time but no money. Some people have both. We'll take any of the aforementioned," Peterson said.

**Not many manufacturers have a full-time advocacy staffer. Does this surprise you?**

**Peterson:** That needs to be clarified. I'm far from a full-time advocacy director. My main job at Kona is sponsorship/athlete coordinator but a big component of the remainder of my time is advocacy. This is a point I'd really like to make here. We've been able to do some really great things at Kona on a national scale and also had a huge impact locally. But it does not require someone to be a full-time, full-paid staff member to make it happen. You just need someone with a passion and an employer with a vision past the immediate bottom line. Like any other component of a job, sometimes it's full throttle and at

other times it's on the back burner. To answer the question directly: does it surprise me more industry companies don't have a full-time advocacy position? No. Does it surprise me they don't have someone, anyone to help with advocacy issues? Absolutely. Elayna Caldwell-Grim at Fox Racing Shox is another example of someone who has a very similar job description as mine and is making a positive impact.

**Where does Kona's strong belief in advocacy come from?**

**Peterson:** Kona really does believe that bikes can help make the world a better place. It all stems from the belief there are a number of ways to make that happen. My passion is mainly trails and getting kids on bikes but we also are involved with the Africa Bike Project. Our involvement runs the whole gamut.

**What are some accomplishments you're most proud of?**

**Peterson:** It's hard to say what I'm most proud of. If I had to point my finger at one thing it would be the Interbike Buck-A-Bowl fundraiser. We've been able to generate a lot of money for good causes. In many ways it has been a catalyst for other people to get involved

in advocacy because after the tourney they realize advocacy can be fun.

**What about the 8th grade class project you've taken under your wing?**

**Peterson:** In our community eighth-grade middle school students are required to do a service-learning project that integrates education with encouraging volunteerism. I had given a fair number of various presentations to classes over the years and finally I was approached by Kerry Herman of Whatcom Middle School to do it more formally. This year I have 12 kids who I'll teach trail-building techniques, etiquette and hopefully get them into something that they will want to continue in the future. The project consists of two in-classroom sessions, six on-trail sessions and the final session is a group ride. I get the kids from 9 a.m. to noon and I've really come to enjoy it. What really makes me want to keep doing it is that each year there is at least one troubled student in the session. Kerry mentioned to me last year how this seems to have carried over in general for them. It's nice to know you've helped a kid find something they can feel good about and help make a lasting positive impact in their lives.

**What haven't you done as advocacy**

**director at Kona that you would like to do?**

**Peterson:** One thing I'd really like to accomplish if only on a small scale is getting kids back on bikes as transport to schools. Not only would this be a great thing for their physical fitness but it helps them remember bikes—and that they're a good thing for transport and fun.

**Do you think the industry is doing enough in terms of advocacy?**

**Peterson:** No. I don't want to point fingers and there are some that set a great example like Quality Bicycle Products, Chris King and Planet Bike. But some of the biggest companies out there seem to have no active interest. It's pretty sad really.

**What have IMBA and Bikes Belong meant to advocacy for the industry?**

**Peterson:** Both organizations serve a great function for the industry as a whole. Bikes Belong is much more of the suit-and-tie program while IMBA is much more grassroots, scratch in the dirt. It's not possible to donate time and money to every advocacy organization. That's why they are both important because they offer a choice, both good

ones. It would be hard to deny that they both have made huge inroads for advocacy issues and thus our industry.

**How much of your job consists of wrangling with politicians?**

**Peterson:** I don't do a lot of wrangling other than regionally, and not much locally because we started early on mountain bike access issues so we have it pretty good here. When necessary or requested I work at the higher levels. IMBA and Bikes Belong are the experts and many times they just need the support of the cycling community to strengthen their case.

**What separates Kona from other companies in terms of advocacy?**

**Peterson:** In advocacy it's better to rally for a common cause than separate from others, so I don't see it that way. No doubt at Kona we take advocacy seriously. For many years we did a lot of advocacy and never really told anyone because it honestly wasn't about the PR benefits. I pushed for more publicity and Dan and Jake were reluctant at first. They felt it was somewhat disingenuous but my feeling was that by example we could get more people involved. We'd like to think to some extent it has worked. **BRAIN**