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# DOWN YOUR BIKE



Paul Howard is the mountain bike whisperer from Whistler



Whistler is a Canadian resort town in the southern Pacific Ranges of the Coast Mountains in the province of British Columbia, approximately 125 km (78 mi) north of Vancouver and 36 km (22 mi) south of the town of Pemberton.

Over two million skiing, snowboarding and mountain biking enthusiasts visit the party hot spot each year hoping to tame its wild party scene and the 8,000 acres that stretch over Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains.

Englishman Paul Howard first arrived in Whistler after finishing a University Degree in Genetics and instantly fell in love with the area; at the time he was running a summer mountain bike school in North Carolina and decided to take a break and drive up to Whistler to go riding for a fortnight. On the drive home, Paul reckons he was overcome with a realisation that he'd eventually make Whistler his home.

Nowadays, Paul lives in Whistler with his wife Shannon and their two children and runs ZEP Techniques: a company that facilitates Professional Mountain Bike Instructors Association (PMBIA) training courses and clinics for beginner and experienced riders.

Paul speaks exclusively to *WTW* about what it took to become an international mountain bike whisperer living in Whistler...

**In 2016, you're celebrating your 10-year anniversary of moving to Whistler and running ZEP Techniques. How did an Englishman come to live and raise a family in Whistler?**

"I first arrived in Whistler after finishing my



Paul (left) and his whispering disciples.

University Degree in Genetics. I was dating an American girl at the time and hanging out in Seattle all day while she went to work. I'd been running a summer mountain bike school in North Carolina (where I'd done a few summers) and wanted some time off, so I decided to take a drive up to Whistler and spend a fortnight riding... It was literally heaven. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that a place so beautiful actually existed. On the drive back to Seattle, I experienced this overwhelming realisation that Whistler would eventually be where I'd spend the rest of my life raising a family and growing old. I had a loose life plan to go into medicine after finishing my initial degree, but working the summers in North Carolina was a game changer. The whole set up was amazing; over the years I was there, we

built a ton of new trails, got a deal with Marin bikes and replaced the whole fleet, mapped the trails and designed a two-week mountain bike program for children. The camp jobs don't traditionally pay a great amount, but I was flying back to Uni in the UK after every American summer with more money than all my mates had saved during their summer off in the UK. It got me thinking: 'I wonder whether I can make a full-time living off teaching people to mountain bike?' I grew up snowboarding and skiing, so I figured I'd train to become a snowboard instructor during the winter months and rotate jobs with the seasons. Three years later I was 'not' quite making a living, but I had enough money to live okay for someone in his early twenties. I moved to Whistler soon after (2006) and I'm still coaching to this day." ▶

## What does ZEP stand for and what does it seek to achieve?

“Ha, ha... ZEP is just a stupid nickname from when I was a kid. I was joking around when I was younger and saying if I ever had a mountain bike school, I'd have to call it ZEP. I mean... I just never thought it'd happen. No one ever thinks: 'I'm going to be a mountain bike coach when I grow up.' So when it came to actually coming up with an official company name, I wrote down ZEP Techniques... It seemed like a catchy name and I couldn't think of anything else. I always said I'd eventually change the name, but I never did. It kind of caught on and people remember it. The main goal behind ZEP has always been to improve the instructing and guiding standards in our sport. We aim to offer the best lessons and camps in the industry and we've helped pioneer and develop the world's largest provider for mountain bike instructor certifications: the internationally recognised Professional Mountain Bike Instructor Association (PMBIA). Put simply, we strive to introduce and continuously maintain the same level of professionalism in teaching and training mountain bike instructors that is evident in other sports such as skiing and snowboarding. Before starting ZEP Techniques, I saw some shocking things in most places I worked in the late 90s and early 2000s, but it was just a sign of the times. The appetite for mountain biking was quickly becoming ravenous, but there were no professional resources to train people how to teach safe biking techniques. The two driving



Certified Whistler whisperers are grinners.

forces to starting ZEP Techniques in 2006 as to provide better instructor training courses and to introduce businesses and people to the industry who could offer quality lessons and camps. I took a couple of courses for mountain bike coaching being offered in the UK and the Canada at the time, but they fell very short of what I felt could have, and should have, been offered to the MTB industry. There were some good riders (and some ex-professionals) trying to get involved with instructor training, but the reality is that there's a huge difference between teaching people how to mountain bike and training other people how to teach. But that's okay... You either accept that fact, or you do something about it and we really believed that the PBMI courses would raise the bar. ZEP Techniques is purely a mountain bike coaching company. It's just that most our coaches and myself are also Canadian Association of Snowboard Instructors (CASI) Level 4 qualified instructors in the winter.

Now, to give you an idea, there are about 10-15,000 active snowboard instructors in Canada and there's only about 55 CASI Level 4 qualified instructors. It took me eight years to obtain that particular accreditation which is referred to as the 'PhD of Snowboarding'. ZEP Technique coaches are some of the best sports instructors in the world. Teaching is teaching, regardless of the sport and it's this skill that makes the difference between booking a lesson with ZEP Techniques versus someone else.”

## Tell us about the Professional Mountain Bike Instructors Association...

“The PMBIA Mission Statement reads verbatim as follows: ‘To deliver one united and globally accepted, professional instructor & guides certification standard to the mountain bike industry while promoting the profession of mountain bike instruction & guiding and the sport of mountain biking overall. Ultimately, ►

The Whistler whisperer in action.





Paul on the downhill haul.



our goal is to get more people on mountain bikes by improving the standards of Instruction & Guiding within mountain biking, making the sport safer and easier to teach and to learn for new and current riders alike.' ZEP Techniques started the PMBIA Instructor courses in 2006 and the concept absolutely took off. Our dream was for PMBIA to one day ultimately become the governing body for mountain bike instructor training; an official organisation that could provide a consistent and professional worldwide training standard to instructors. PMBIA then grew much faster than ZEP Techniques itself. In 2015, we announced PMBIA becoming a not-for-profit; this involved PMBIA partnering and collaborating with a Vancouver-based instructor company called 'Endless Biking' who we invited to come in and analyse everything PMBIA had been doing in terms of process. It was great opportunity to look at our operation under another lens and to keep learning. My role as PMBIA Technical Director is pretty expansive, but it mostly involves the facilitation and ongoing development of programs. I work with the PMBIA Course Conductors and gather their feedback and ideas; as well as collate any feedback from our Advisory Board or course participants. I use all of this information to edit, write and design the PMBIA Reference Guide: the 160-page instructor manual that each instructor gets with every course. I also help coordinate and run Course Conductor training every spring and work with the Assistant Director on technical ideas that we submit to the rest of the group."

**Does ZEP Techniques facilitate mountain biking adventure trips?**

"The key services of ZEP Techniques are lessons, camps and tours. Most of the lessons we teach are private programs designed for each group's specific needs. We offer anywhere from a couple of private lessons over a weekend to a package of eight sessions over a few weeks. We also offer weekend camps and single and multi-week camps. These are really unique to ZEP Techniques. We were the first to offer multi-week training camps for adults which involve four days per week of coaching and a bunch of extra workshops with industry experts which include suspension set-up clinics, strength and conditioning sessions, nutrition sessions and pump track training, etc. The ethos behind the ZEP Technique week and multi-week camps is that they are the 'ultimate mountain bike training experience' which involves the best coaching on the best trails in the world, with industry leading, professional instructors. We try to take a holistic approach to becoming a better mountain biker. We spend a lot of time on technique and skills and teach intermediate to expert riders about proper bike set-up, how to eat and how you train off the bike. It sounds full on, but it's really all just a lot of fun."

**Would you like to publicly thank Shannon for contributing to your success? Nudge nudge... Wink, wink...**

"My wife Shannon is an amazing woman. She's my rock and there's simply no way ZEP Techniques or PMBIA would be where



Paul (left) and mates whispering in a car.

they are without her. I owe it all to her. She supported me when we were barely making money and has always believed in me and encouraged me. It's definitely been hard. There was a long time there where I was just working all the time and hardly breaking even. Trying to earn a living in an industry that you're also trying to build from the ground up seems absolutely crazy in retrospect. In the beginning, it sounded nuts when I told people that I was eventually going to be a mountain bike instructor and it was even more nuts to be telling people during a period when the profession of teaching mountain biking didn't exist. The coolest thing Shannon and I have collectively achieved together is to help build the industry to a point where being a mountain bike instructor is an attainable and desired career path."

Keen to visit Canada and become a mountain bike instructor? Visit ZEP Techniques at [zepmtbcamps.com](http://zepmtbcamps.com) and get to know more about PMBIA Instructor Certifications by visiting [pmbia.org](http://pmbia.org) 