

By Susan Swarbrick

LEE Craigie is relaxing in the afternoon sunshine outside a Glasgow cafe, her sleek black carbon fibre steed propped up against a nearby wall. As we are settling down to chat, fellow mountain biker Rab Wardell arrives and the pair do a skit where they pretend to hate each other.

At least, that's the plan. Except Craigie has forgotten their pre-rehearsed bit and greets him with an enthusiastic: "Hey Rab!".

While Wardell wanders off, shaking his head and groaning, she smiles apologetically. That's the thing about Craigie. She is heartwarmingly nice. Yet, give her a bike and the transformation couldn't be more stark as she becomes a fierce and formidable competitor.

Certainly, none of her rivals will be counting her out as they head into the 2013 British National Cross Country Mountain Bike Championships in Glasgow next weekend.

The Cannondale UK rider will compete in what is expected to be a strong field including Olympian Annie Last (Trek Factory Racing), Lesley Paterson (Team Bradgate) and Tracy Moseley (Malvern Cycle Sport).

Already she has had a taste of what victory on the Cathkin Braes course feels like, winning the third round of the 2013 SXC Cross Country Mountain Bike Series in May.

But importantly for Craigie, 34, returning there a week today will provide another opportunity to gain experience on the trails where medals will be won and lost at the 2014 Commonwealth Games next summer.

"Being able to race on it, that is key," she says. "You can go up there and train all you like, but you need to know what it's like to ride at race pace against other people. That's when you get your gains and pick up crucial details."

Glasgow-born Craigie has twice been selected to represent Britain in the World MTB Championships, finishing 44th in 2012. The reigning British National Cross Country Series champion, she remains the favourite to

HOME RULE

BRITISH NATIONAL CROSS COUNTRY MOUNTAIN BIKE CHAMPIONSHIPS

It's another chance to race on the 2014 course, but Lee Craigie also wants the champion's jersey

retain that title. She claimed second place in the fourth round at Margam Park, Wales, last weekend, bagging her first Commonwealth Games qualification standard.

"That takes the pressure off a bit," she says. "I now just need to do the same again at the British Nationals."

While she receives some financial support from Scottish Cycling, a £500 annual grant from Inverness Area Sports Council and kit through her sponsor Cannondale UK, Craigie regularly works 60-hour weeks through the winter to make ends meet during race season.

Now based in the Highland capital, she co-founded Velocity Cafe and Bicycle Workshop alongside friends Laura Nicolson, Penny Phillips, Evan Beswick and Ferga Perry last year. A former outdoor instructor turned child and adolescent psychotherapist, Craigie runs a project called Cycletherapy out of the space,

working with youngsters excluded from school, teaching them basic mechanics and bike riding.

"I teach them how physical activity can regulate your mood, make you feel good about yourself, manage anger and depression," she says. "Everyone I've worked with over an eight-week block has re-engaged to some degree with education or employment. It's fantastic to be able to see that."

Craigie was a late arrival to the ranks of elite mountain biking, competing in her first race at the ripe old age of 25. While she describes herself as a "pure mountain biker", she enjoys racing on the roads too, mainly because the psychology of the team tactics fascinates her. But mountain biking, she says, is her "meditation", often using it as a means to escape the white noise of every day life.

She isn't the only one within her family to reach the upper echelons of sport: her mother

Lesley played tennis and squash at international level while her sister Kim and grandfather Arthur Murray have both been capped for Scotland at rugby.

But her own path hasn't been without adversity. Three years ago Craigie landed a jump badly, crashed and hit the ground with such force that her rib cage popped out of her sternum. While the physical wounds healed enough to get back on her bike within eight weeks, the psychological after effects were longer lasting.

"To be honest I'm still coming back from that," she admits. "Before I used to think I was invincible, but now realise I'm not. I guess in some ways it has made me a better rider. Even now, though, I'm clawing back that confidence. It was brutal. I spent four hours on a spinal board. At first the doctors thought I'd shattered everything, that I'd broken my neck and sternum. There were a horrible few moments, then it turned out they were simply reading the X-rays wrong."

When not on her bike, Craigie can usually be found partaking in her favoured hobby of "building things". "I renovated my own house and I'm quite into building yurts at the moment," she says. "I made one and took it out to my friend's land in Spain. Sadly, it recently burned down so I need to build another for my own place. I'm quite looking forward to that."

Craigie lists her other passions as art, music festivals, language and literature. "I love contemporary art and particularly Glaswegian dark humour," she says. "I go out of my way to find things like that."

As for next weekend, she is relishing the prospect of competing on home turf. "It would be nice to wear the national champion's jersey for the coming year," she says. "It depends entirely on the field. But on that course with a home crowd? This is mountain biking – anything can happen."

□ The 2013 British National Cross Country Mountain Bike Championships takes place in Glasgow on July 20-21. There will be restricted parking around Cathkin Braes Country Park with a shuttle bus in operation from Hampden Transport Hub every 15 minutes from 11am-6pm (Saturday) and 9am-6.30pm (Sunday).



Photograph: Colin Meerns