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A photograph of a forest trail, likely the TK Trail in Southern Oregon, showing a dirt path winding through tall, thin trees. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and branches. Large, white, lowercase letters are overlaid on the left side of the image, reading 'd', 't', 'r', 't' from top to bottom.

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EVERY YEAR, A GROUP OF FRIENDS PLUNGES DEEP INTO SOUTHERN OREGON'S WILDERNESS TO HAMMER MONSTER SINGLETRACK, DRAIN A KEG OF BEER AND SEARCH FOR A MYTHICAL BEAST. WHAT THEY FIND IS BEAUTIFUL—BUT IT SURE AIN'T PRETTY.

By Johnathon Allen
Photographs by Jamie Kripke

The boys on Tour head down the TK Trail, looking for God-only-knows what.

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TK, Jake, TK and TK sit atop TK Ridge to admire the views and ask: If you were a sasquatch, where would you hide?



WHERE THE HELL IS JAKE? I ASK NO ONE IN PARTICULAR.

It's been an hour since the last rider came ripping down the S-shaped curves of Secret Way into camp, and almost 90 minutes since anyone last saw him. Given that we've been riding all afternoon through the largest remaining tract of old-growth woods left in the

Lower 48—on a set of mostly unmapped trails where GPS is useless—the list of possible explanations is long. 🍷 T-Bone assumes that Jake has suffered a mechanical and is making the long hot walk back to camp. G considers Jake's rookie status—this is only his second time on a mountain bike—and imagines the worst. “I bet he's either laying off the trail somewhere with a broken collarbone,” he says, “or he's tied to a tree getting sodomized by a Sasquatch.” I choose to believe the more sanguine, though just as potentially harrowing the possibility that Jake merely took a wrong turn. 🍷 But no one is particularly bent out of shape. The seemingly endless potential for any of these catastrophes to occur is part of the annual mountain bike ritual we've come to call “Wookie Tour.” 🍷 Every summer solstice since 2000, this crew of friends has converged deep in the

heart of the Siskiyou Mountains in Southern Oregon to kick off the riding season with a weeklong gathering disguised as a two-wheeled Sasquatch hunt. We set up base at a remote campsite (dubbed “Secret Camp”), drop a keg into the river, and spend the first few days of summer indulging all our singletrack shredding fantasies. 🍷 In the eight years we've been coming out here, no one has ever disappeared—not for more than a day, anyway. As I fished a cold beer from the river, I silently wondered if Jake was going to be the first.

THE ORIGINS of Wookie Tour can be traced back 10 years to a globetrotting mountain bike bum known to my friends and me simply as Wilmer. In the summer of '98, Wilmer decided to pedal his titanium Kona down the Pacific Coast with a pink plastic flamingo strapped to his rear rack. Along the way he stopped at my house in Ashland, Oregon, to rest and refuel.

When he pushed off, Wilmer, as he is prone to do, took the most adventurous route possible by riding back to the coast through the Siskiyou. I'd never seen a trail on any map indicating that this could be possible, but Wilmer was undaunted. So I pedaled with him to the top of Mt. Ashland and watched as he and his plastic sidekick rode off into a few hundred miles of prime cougar habitat without a map or compass. I wondered if I would ever see him again.

Days later, he called from a bar in Eureka, California, to report that he had not only discovered a route to the coast, but that he'd seen a Sasquatch in the process. He sounded utterly serious.

The Siskiyou Mountains and the neighboring Kalmiopsis Range separate the Cascades from the Pacific Ocean. The region contains 2.5 million acres of rugged mountains, ancient wilderness and untamed rivers. They are blank canvases onto which people project their own legends, because hardly anyone ever gets too deep in. In the Siskiyou, rumors started decades ago of a Bigfoot living in the wilderness. A blend of hearsay and folklore has sustained the speculation for decades. And now there was Wilmer's sighting.

"Well, what did it look like?" I asked skeptically.

"Like a Rastafarian wookiee," Wilmer shouted over the din of a pizza pub. "And, man, did it smell bad." Wilmer spent the next two years guiding in Bavaria and obsessing about sasquatch, or, as he referred to it, the wookiee. When he came back to the States, he returned to Oregon in search of the Hairy One.

Intrigued by the possibility of finding new trails, a half-dozen mountain bike buddies showed up in my front yard on the first day of summer to join Wilmer on his quest. And, whether by extensive planning or inspired improvisation, Wilmer somehow led us directly to the most ideal base camp we could have imagined. It had covered shelters, a ground well that pumps pure spring water, fire rings, a gurgling creek and a clean outhouse. More importantly, it was situated at the center of a seemingly endless network of plush singletrack, bomb-dropping fire roads and overgrown mining roads stretching out in every direction through valleys so remote my GPS was reduced to nothing but a flashlight.

Unfortunately, these moments of navigational genius tended to lead others to follow Wilmer blindly into the forest without asking critical questions such as, "Where are we going?" Often, that meant getting stuck in the middle of nowhere with no food, no water and no idea how to get back to camp. This was the situation we ended up in that first year, after Wilmer's short morning

Tools of the Tour include extensive camping supplies; the nearest diner food is 40 minutes away.



recon ride turned into a torturous, hours-long grind up to the fire lookout on top of 4,500-foot

Onion Mountain, from which we could see the expanse of the Siskiyou stretching all the way to the coast.

We consumed all remaining water and food during a brief summit break, then chased Wilmer down a series of unmarked dirt roads at eye-watering speeds. It wasn't until we hit a dusty dead end at the bottom of a steep, miles-long descent that we realized A) Wilmer had no idea where he was, and B) he *didn't care*. After a moment of ponderous assessment, he took off again into the manzanita brush following a barely visible rabbit trail up an unrideable scree slope, his bike over his shoulder and a bullet-proof smile on his face. "Got it now!" he called back. "Camp's only about 3,000 feet over the next pass."

All we could do was suck up the dehydration, heat exhaustion and mind-reeling bonk, and suffer through the death march back to camp. We trudged silently uphill, sometimes pedaling, sometimes pushing, sometimes hallucinating, while our muscles simmered in a biochemical stew of lactic acid and sweat. All that kept us moving was the thought that over the next hill—hopefully—was an oasis of salty food, cold beer and soft, flat things.

But the riding was astonishing. The trails were epic and mostly unknown to the outside world. "Tour," as we called it, became an official tradition the following year when a crew almost double in size converged on Secret Camp on solstice eager to do it again.

Every year since, Tour has unfolded as a sort of mountain biking Grand Guignol. We spend inordinate amounts of time in camp meticulously tuning our bikes, then tear off into the forest on rides that are sometimes stupid in scale and frequently last until the sun is a rust-colored stain on the horizon.

Eventually, someone takes a wrong turn, or stacks it into a tree, or breaks a critical bike part and ends up staggering back to camp. The place is so remote that if something really bad happens, like you break a femur or get an '80s-era Madonna song stuck in your head, you're screwed.

Hence the three inviolable rules of Tour: A) You must be able to hang; B) no whining; C) no chicks.

The "guys only" rule is not an issue of gender equality; I've met plenty of women who can hang without whining. It's simple

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politics. On Tour, no one minds if you talk a bunch of crap, smell like a garlic black-bean burrito, or smoke entire bales of weed. All anyone cares about is whether they can beat you up and/or down the hill. Chicks—especially cute, single, mountain biking chicks—change this dynamic entirely.

EVEN BEFORE Jake's disappearance, this year's Tour was teetering out of control. As the years passed, Tour attracted a widely divergent range of riders: aimless 20-somethings; old-school Gen-X dudes still chasing the pull of gravity; former pro racers who refuse to stop riding; and wide-eyed 30-year-olds up to their bottom brackets in mortgages and newborns.

Inevitably, perhaps, given that sort of diversity, our two-wheeled testosterone-fest has fostered a number of rivalries—friendly and not so much—over the years. One of the most notable had cropped up this year between T-Bone and G. This classic case of old-school veteran versus new-school upstart was developing into a source of great entertainment.

G is a 30-something, 210-pound Viking who has been riding since he could throw a leg over a tricycle. T-Bone, by contrast, is a bookish intellectual in his mid-20s who learned to ride a mountain bike in college, drops words like “acculturated” in casual conversation, and talks smack well above his actual ability to ride. While T-Bone knows this hyperbole is patently ridiculous, he enjoys pushing G's buttons.

“Dude, I beat you to the top of every climb,” T-Bone taunted.

“Great, you're faster at going slow,” G retorted. “Who cares?”

“Look man, do the math,” T-Bone said, scratching a formula into the dirt. “If you subtract the speed you ride from the speed I ride, factor in 4 percent for infla-

tion, and 2 percent for age difference, and multiply that by the passport numbers of all 19 9/11 hijackers, it proves irrefutably that Al Qaeda is behind Interbike and that I totally kick your ass.”

One thing they teach you at hippie colleges like Evergreen, T-Bone's alma mater, is how to spit a mean game even when you have no idea what you're talking about. In fact, the other reason Jake wound up going missing was because T-Bone convinced him, no doubt through extensive drunken harangues, that Jake not only had to get into mountain biking but that he had to take a fully rigid 29er on Tour because this would instantly make him cooler.

The confrontation between G and T-Bone eventually climaxed in a dual from the top of The Jedi, the area's premier downhill. This brakes-optional stretch of whip-fast singletrack—technically called Taylor Creek Trail, but known to locals as “Return of The Jedi”—drops almost 6 miles from the top of Lone Tree Pass to Sam Brown Campground, careening through thick stands of moss-covered ponderosa and banking fern-filled creek beds at the

Stuck in the
Siskiyou? You
won't find
much help by
looking skyward;
Wilmer's
sidekick now
has company.



speed of thought.

“Tell you what,” G said. “I'll even give you a head start. In order for all your talk to mean a damn thing, you have to drop me before we get to the bottom.”

T-Bone took off like a prairie dog diving into its hole.

“Don't hurt the kid,” I said.

“Well, that wouldn't be any fun at all,” G replied as he popped a cleat into his pedal.

Near the bottom of The Jedi is a sharp, off-camber turn right before the trail's fastest speed zone. G didn't just pass T-Bone on the inside of this corner, he shoulder-checked him just to make his point, sending him tumbling ass over handlebar into a tree well. T-Bone spent the rest of the afternoon nursing his bruises in the creek next to the keg, but never stopped talking. I began to suspect he actually likes getting beaten down, in some weird *Fight Club* sort of way, for trying to live up to his own idealized self-image.

WE'RE STILL trading conspiracy theories on Jake's whereabouts when AB arrives after driving five hours from Portland. While AB is neither Tour's strongest nor fastest rider, he is its de facto flag bearer. As both a full-time tech-nerd for a fast-growing company and a full-time dad for a newborn son, AB rides far less than anyone else in the crew. Regardless, his entire year is spent preparing for the ordeal he'll face come the summer solstice.

Tour reminds AB that somewhere beyond the desk, the crib, the yard work and the mortgage, a world of trails still waits to be ridden. AB doesn't just enjoy Tour, he needs it. As a result, he savors the gut-busting climbs as much as he does the free-flowing downhills. Since AB often brings up the rear, he is also no stranger to the sublime terror of being lost and alone in the Siskiyou.


“When was the last time you guys saw him?” AB inquires.

“Briggs Creek, almost two hours ago,” I reply.

“Man, that's a bad place to drop the soap in the shower. We better go look for him.”

A search party is assembled to retrace our afternoon ride back up the loamy S-curves of Secret Way, down the overgrown former mining road called Elk Horn, and out to Briggs Creek Trail. We momentarily set aside our rescue mission to capitalize on the many opportunities for air presented by Elk Horn's numerous

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Socked in for the evening, with adult beverages always close by, the game of one-upsmanship switches from bikes to tall tales.

RIDE ON THE WILD SIDE

To ride in Siskiyou National Forest, take I-5 to Exit 61 and travel through the town of Merlin on Galice Road. Turn left at Briggs Valley Road (NF Road 25), and drive over Lone Tree Pass to Sam Brown Campground.

Briggs Creek, Taylor Creek (a.k.a. The Return of The Jedi) and Dutchy Creek trails all start there, as well as the roads up to Chrome Ridge and Onion Mountain fire lookout. There are many unmarked trails and roads.

Forest Service maps show dirt roads but are unreliable trail guides. Buy them at the Galice Ranger Station (541/471-6500). The closest wrench is Bike Kraft (785 Rogue River Highway, Grants Pass; 541/476-4935), 40 minutes away.

water bars until we come screaming around a corner and encounter Jake's pale apparition pushing his bike in the late-day sun.

We quickly piece together what happened. Briggs Creek Trail is a riparian roller-coaster romp with numerous root jibs, rock drops and sudden short, steep climbs. There's only one turn on the route back to camp, but if you miss it you could pedal deeper into the forest for a very long time before you figure it out—which was precisely what happened to Jake. He is delirious and dehydrated, and he has no idea if he is even going in the right direction.

Later, sitting in the smoky glow of the campfire clutching a

beer, Jake recounts his wandering odyssey. "It took me a while before I figured out that I must have missed a turn somewhere, so I started backtracking," he says. "I wasn't that worried until I stopped to rest and everything suddenly went silent. I swore I could feel the eyes of a wookiee on me."

Everybody leans in with renewed interest except for Jamie, a photographer sent by the magazine. "Come on, you guys," he interjects. "You're kidding, right? I mean, in all the time you've been coming out here, have any of you actually seen a Sasquatch?"

"The wookiee isn't something you see, man," G says. "It's something you feel."

The moment passes, everyone satisfied with Jake's initiation. In roughly 12 hours he will be hugging a tree while puking out chunks of a peanut butter Clif Bar. He will chalk up this purge to chasing full suspension riders down a rough trail on a fully rigid bike, then jump back onto his rig and continue pedaling as if nothing had happened. The fact that he considers this sort of masochism fun suggests a long and satisfying mountain biking future.

THE FIRE dwindles to a pile of red embers crackling like molten popcorn on the forest floor. Soldiers are strewn about in various states of exhaustion. The first full moon of summer rises



above the valley, and something howls in the distance. Suddenly G stands up and says: “A’right! Who’s up for a midnight ride?”

The suggestion is met with a mix of hesitant groans and chirping crickets. G gives me The Look and soon I’m attaching a light to my handlebar and filling a CamelBak. Jamie decides to hike over and wait near the bottom of the trail to get some night shots. G and I pedal up Lone Tree Pass on a thin ribbon of glowing asphalt. When we reach the top and turn on our lights for the descent, G’s lamp inexplicably fades out and refuses to come back on. Riding up the middle of a moonlit road is one thing. Inside the canopy of trees I can’t even see my pedals, let alone the trail. G decides to attempt descending by staying close enough to me to use my light.

“No problem,” he says. “I’ll just be your shadow and let the wookie guide me.”

This seems almost reasonable until we start rolling and I unapologetically gun my new Tomac Snyder, following gravity’s pull into the darkness. Every time I turn a sharp corner or hit a speed zone I pull away, plunging G’s world into pure blackness. These sections are often littered with rocks, banking berms, and off-camber dips, so I keep waiting to hear the inevitable crash behind me, but there is only silence. I give a periodic hoot over my shoulder and am surprised every time G hoots back.

He’s like an invisible bike ninja following me down the trail. I’m so entranced by this feat that I completely forget about Jamie until we hit a fast straightaway near the bottom and his flash kicks me in the cornea like a steel-toed boot. For a tree-blurred, flash-blinding second, I think I see something charging through the trees in front of us.

Long after the rest of the crew is asleep, I’m still poking at the fire with a charred stick, wondering about that lingering pop of light, the shape in the woods, and Jamie’s question: Why do we keep coming back here? What is this all about, really?

I don’t think any of us ever expect to see a Sasquatch. Originally, we were just in it for the fun of following a legitimately crazy person into the woods in pursuit of new trail. But the fact that we kept coming back indicated that there was something deeper going on. It seems like we’re looking for *something*.

No doubt, there was the camaraderie element. You tend to trust someone who has suffered through a Tour-related calamity in a way you trust few others. You know that if you go missing, they’ll come looking for you just as soon as they’re done joking about how to divvy up your stuff. There was certainly some lingering nostalgia for the sense of relentless exploration that Wilmer embodied in those first few years. But many of the newcomers had never even met Wilmer.

I finally shake my head—who the hell knows?—and haul myself up. I turn away from the fire and stop as something catches my eye. It’s my wobbly shadow cast by the light of the flames, stretching off to the edge of the woods. And then it hits me.

Tour is a quest, all right. It’s the search for the wild, elusive side of ourselves that is chased off by the demands of corporate cubicles and familial responsibilities. This inner Sasquatch can be found only by riding so deeply into the forest that you’re not even sure how to get home again; you can often only glimpse it, paradoxically, when the trail is pitch black. As we each gradually succumb to the pressures of modern life, staying connected to this wild side has become as important as it is difficult. So we load up our bikes every year and make the trek back to Secret Camp to renew the search.

That was why the rules were so inviolable, why the week was so sacrosanct. None of us was full-on resisting the onset of the

middle third of our lives, but it made things a lot easier to be able to duck back for a week, and for one sweet blur of days at the dawn of summer, to dance with the beast.

I kick some dirt on the fire and head for my sleeping bag. For now, the entire camp is asleep. But come morning, there is going to be a very long ride in the woods.

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